

# Police Officer Stress, Coping Mechanisms, and Family Life

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## Abstract

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Law Enforcement Officers experience stress for a variety of reasons that are related to both the nature and the organization of police work. Consequences of stress are felt by the police department, the individual, as well as their family. Building on previous research in this area, this project describes thirteen in-depth interviews with officers and their significant others in an effort to understand the impact of police stress on work and family life and vice versa. Officers were found to struggle between balancing their police role and home life. The family serves as both a coping resource for the officer but also a source of stress. Interactions among the officers also served as a way to cope with stress (as a way to learn skills related to their job, to relieve stress, and to talk about work) but varied depending on work shift. Each of these factors are discussed to understand how these officers manage the interrelated aspects of police work, family life, and stress.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Although law enforcement and policing are some of the most studied professions by social scientists (Violanti 1999), relatively little is known about causes and consequences of occupational stress and the role it plays in the professional and personal lives of police officers. Quantitative studies have offered statistics about specific stressors related to policing but these are limited in nature. They give numbers about incidents and stress but they do not take into consideration the personal aspect and the individual stories that are extracted through in-depth interviews.

Stress in policing is found to come from four areas, those inherent to police work, from within the organization, those external to the agency, and individual troubles (Swatt, Gibson, and Piquero, 2007). The critical incidents that occur while in the line of duty have been well documented and are regularly reported by the media. These incidents, combined with daily occurrences such as shift work and dealing with people in different stages of distress have an impact on the stress felt by police officers (Paton 2005). Other sources of stress derive from supervisors, the criminal justice system, and problems at home that may influence their police role (Gibson, Swatt, and Jolicouer 2001).

The acceptance of the police role by police recruits typically manifests itself during the training academy to prepare them for the streets. Here they learn valuable skills in defensive tactics, driving, and learning to control their emotions (Violanti 1999). Officers deal with the public and need to remain calm and in control of all situations. In order to be effective they must take emotion out of their job and think rationally, while many citizens around them may not (Paton 2005). This depersonalization is key for being a good police officer, but it has the opposite effect with family and friends (Violanti

1999). Interpersonal relationships require sharing of emotions and being there to listen to one another, something that the officer learned not to do for their job (Violanti 1999).

To combat the stress brought on by these factors officers can choose to externalize or internalize the way they cope with stress (Gibson, Swatt, and Jolicouer 2001). There are some coping mechanisms that are healthy, while some, like alcohol use, can lead to more issues for the individual, the family, and the organization. However, to date there have been relatively few studies which explore how these coping mechanisms shape family life and interactions both in-side and outside of police work.

Interviewing law enforcement officers and their significant others allows for a more complete understanding of stress and how the career impacts family life.

Connecting the personal stories of each interviewee will allow for an understanding of the relationship between stress and the family within this police department. Differences among the answers and stories are examined to develop links between previous research and this current sample.

In this study I focused on one medium-sized law enforcement agency in the Northeastern United States. I conducted in-depth interviews with officers of various ranks and seniority in the agency. Their responses will be used to analyze the types of stressors felt by the officers and the ways in which they aim to reduce this stress. The police department I observed has their own Critical Incident Peer Support Team. This team already responds to critical incidents within the department and has resources available to all officers in need. Conclusions drawn from these interviews will aid in understanding stressors and how they impact officers not only in policing but in other high stress occupations.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

In order to understand the future of police stress and coping there must be an understanding of the literature published to date about this topic. It is important to discuss general findings of stress, work-family spillover, and coping mechanisms. Defining the problem and theorizing about possible solutions is a way to combat the stress felt by law enforcement officers. This chapter will outline previous research conducted on policing, emotional control, and family-work dynamics. Several of the previous studies performed on police officer stress and family impact have various limitations that will be addressed in the current study.

### *Defining Stress*

Interest in understanding stress has grown in recent years and acquiring knowledge about this phenomenon is key to discerning the effects and ways to help cope with stress in a positive way. Stress is simply defined as the body's response to any pressing demand (Stevens 2005). Circumstances leading to strain in individuals have physical and psychological changes in the body. These responses are positive or negative, depending on the situation. Bodily responses in these situations are meant to be temporary, to help the person in danger react by either fighting or fleeing the area (Vuorensyrjä and Mälkiä 2010).

Hormones begin to race through the body to prepare the being for the perceived life-threatening demands during the first stage of stress, known as the alarm stage (Stevens 2005). Perception is key in this case, the threat does not have to be real to invoke a consequence for the individual. The sympathetic nervous system is activated



and begins to create a pounding heart to get blood out to the extremities and sweating. (Stevens 2005). This reaction is beneficial if a person requires a brief vigorous response to a threat, but is not sustainable.

Resistance is the second stage of stress which is ideal for a less intense and longer activity (Stevens 2005). The body attempts to get back to the normal stage but hormones keep the person aroused for a longer period of time. These responses are involuntary and produce real physical, emotional, and mental reactions. Individuals at this stage demonstrate higher levels of anxiety, mood swings, fatigue, and lack of emotional control (Stevens 2005). Consequences of this stage can impact an individual's daily life and lead into the next phase of stress.

Exhaustion is the final stage of stress and one that can have a strong mental and physical influence on the individual (Stevens 2005). This state occurs especially if the stress continues to build and lasts over an extended period of time. In the late 1970's researchers began calling this the general adaptation syndrome (Stevens 2005). Stress can become incapacitating, leading to general weakness and in extreme cases it could lead to a breaking point (Stevens 2005). Long term emotional effects include depression and avoidance while physical damages result in coronary artery disease, hypertension, stroke, ulcers, and high blood pressure (Gibson, Swatt, and Jolicoeur 2001).

Stress is not directly palpable, therefore the term "strain" is found throughout this literature and is commonly described as the actual physiological and physical responses to stressful situations, in simple terms it is "felt stress" (Van Wyk 2005: 42). Some researchers claim this differentiation is important in understanding the relationship between stress and strain (Agnew 1992). Stressors are described as the stimulus that

initiate stress reactions and derive from environmental, psychological, or social sources (Gibson et al., 2001).

### *Theoretical Explanations of Stress*

There are three proposed theoretical explanations of stress for an individual. Stress as a response is the first explanation which describes the physiological reactions that occur when a person encounters a stressful situation (Stevens 2005). Everyone brings in their own context and their background when encountering a situation, people may perceive a situation differently than someone else (Stevens 2005). This idea leads into the next explanation, stress as a perceived threat, in which people postulate they are unequipped to handle the current situation (Stevens 2005). In these situations individuals feel stress based on both the situation and the perception of the involved elements. The last theoretical explanation describes stress as a stimulus in cases where the environment is unpleasant for the individual, in policing this type of stress is encountered when officers arrive at fatal scenes or deal with people in distress (Stevens 2005).

### *Stress In Policing*

Researchers constantly debate whether police officers have one of the most stressful occupations in the United States (Swatt, Gibson, and Piquero 2007). Some argue that policing is no more stressful than being a taxi cab driver as people in this profession have a higher homicide rate than police officers while on the job (Stevens 2005). Policing puts the officer at risk due to the possibility to regularly engage themselves against threats, however, there is a major difference between what society thinks about the job and the reality faced by police officers. There are relatively few gun fights, car chases, gang riots, or homicides on every shift that a police officer works.

Although research has focused on such critical incidents in the past it is important to understand all of the features of police work in hopes of identifying and relieving stress in officers.

As research evolved into studying police work as a whole, they identified four primary sources of stress in policing (Swatt et al., 2007; Gibson et al., 2001). The first category identified is stressors external to the police agency which includes community views of police officers as well as other professionals within the criminal justice system. Officers may be frustrated with the system itself or of the anticipated disrespect shown to them by Judges or other agencies (Swatt et al., 2007). Negative attitudes towards police officers can lead to stigma in the media, often describing officers as corrupt or unnecessarily violent. With the prevalence of camera phones throughout the United States at this time, officers need to be aware that their actions can easily be recorded and sent to news outlets or put on social media. Police officers worry that these images would not capture the whole situation and that outsiders will not understand their side in the situation. Modern technology has been important in improving policing, but in this case it can lead to added stress for the officer and the department.

Stressors internal to the agency comprise the second category which has received an increase in attention from the research community in recent years (Swatt et al., 2007; Gibson et al., 2001). The organization within the department is an important tool to alleviate stress in officers, however, poor administration can add to the stresses felt by the patrolmen. Research shows that organizational issues are the most stressful aspect of law enforcement (Violanti 1996). Part of this stress can begin when an officer is first beginning their career, receiving inadequate training can lead to difficulties interacting

with individuals on the street. Poor training in the initial phases of policing can lead to physical and organizational consequences such as a higher number of sick days taken and prescription medication use later in their career (Burke 1993). Being unaware of what to do in certain situations or having fluctuating standard operating procedures is a source of strain for officers. These pressures on the street make officers believe they should be greatly compensated for, and yet low pay for patrolman is an issue in many departments. For a profession in which the person sacrificing themselves for the good of others, they may think they deserve more than they are getting and this can be a genuine stress for the officer (Gibson et al., 2001). Whether an officer views this as a source of stress depends on their own perception (Piquero 2005).

Stressors identified as inherent in police work impact each officer differently based on a number of different factors (Swatt et al., 2007; Gibson et al., 2001; Piquero 2005). These issues affect officers across all different departments and include long hours and mandatory overtime (Swatt et al., 2007; Gibson et al., 2001). Depending on the department, shifts are divided into two 12-hour shifts, usually from 7 to 7, or three 8-hour shifts classified as days, afternoons, or nights (Kirschman 2006). Each rotation has both positives and negatives and these vary based on the individual officer. If a person working the night shift has trouble sleeping during the day, for a variety of reasons, the officer is fatigued when going into work. If officers work the night shift and continue to work on little sleep they can pose a danger to themselves and others. One study found that having no sleep over a 24 hour time period is the same as having a blood alcohol level of .10, as a reference, the legal limit for blood alcohol content while driving in New York is .08 (Kerley 2005). These instances appear because of the mandatory overtime

faced by officers as well. Community policing has led to many details and special events that officers cover based on requests from organizations. Some of these details are boring and in fact, contrary to popular belief, officers experience boredom within their shifts. The instant change between boredom and adrenaline-pumping fear is another inherent stressor in policing (Violanti and Aron 1994). Officers constantly feel psychological pressure because they must always be prepared (Violanti 1996).

General stressors intrinsic to the job include domestic violence incidents which encompass verbal or physical altercations between family members, couples, or people living together and is the most common violence encountered by police officers (Van Wyk 2005: 45). Van Wyk (2005) identified five social sources within domestic incidents that can lead to stress; sexism, racism, dynamics of partner violence, normative perceptions of family and privacy, and media publicity. Sexism begins with the inclusion and acceptance of women in the police culture, or lack thereof. The percentages of women in law enforcement remains well below their actual representation in the population as a whole and recent studies continue to question whether they are accepted by their male counterparts in the field (Van Wyk 2005). Gender role stereotypes can seep into policing, women are comforting to victims and men are strong and able to control the situation. For this reason, both a male and female officer may be sent to these types of calls and this is a stressor because the individual officer may feel they need to fill this gender role (Van Wyk 2005). Strain is created through cultural concepts of gendered behavior and through partner violence, as females are typically the victim (Van Wyk 2005). Women in these situations may find themselves in a cycle of violence. Police are called after a physical dispute and arrest the man because of mandatory arrest laws, then

the man shows an increase of affection towards to woman, shows remorse, and begs forgiveness. However, this phase dies down and tension increases within the relationship and the violent act may occur again (Van Wyk 2005:46). This cycle combined with the mandatory arrest laws is frustrating and a source of stress for the officer because they respond to repeated calls for the same couples, but do not see the victim leave the situation (Van Wyk 2005). The officer may feel this arrest will lead to a more severe beating for the victim in the future since the cycle would merely continue (Van Wyk 2005). Seeing the hurt victim each time they respond can have a significant impact on the officer.

Officer's stress levels may increase when responding to traumatic events and dealing with persons in various categories of distress (Swatt et al., 2007; Gibson et al., 2001; Piquero 2005). These types of events are commonly referred to as critical incidents, they typically involve risk of injury to the officer, another officer, or civilians and are not considered routine events (Paton 2005). Critical incidents range from killing someone in the line of duty, another officer being killed, getting into a physical attack, or encountering a battered child (Violanti and Aron 1994). The first stage of stress officer's experience during these incidents is the alarm stage. This sequence begins when the officer is first dispatched to the event and begins to respond, then controlling the scene, and concluding with the continuation of the shift (Paton 2005). The mobilizing and response step that occurs when first accounting critical incidents is stressful because the officer may not have all of the facts. Understanding the situation can have real effects, one study found that officers first responding to a scene that included death experienced more stress than officers that were dispatched to the scene after the identification of the

nature of the incident (Paton 2005). Highest stress levels in officers are found within three days after a critical incident (Violanti 1996). Officers who experience these critical incidents must then transition back into their shift and into the department. Other patrol officers may not have been at the scene and therefore not understand what they experienced, one of the best ways for officers to deal with these incidents is to communicate with other officers who worked on the problem (Paton 2005). This support system is important in alleviating stress for the individual.

### *Managing Emotions and The Police Role*

Throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century people worked in factories assembling products and had little interaction with people or independence to think for themselves. America began to transition into careers outside of the factory in which they were selling either goods or services. As people began to interact with others, their behaviors and expressions were open to interpretation by the consumer (Hochsfield 1975). The consumer is expecting quality service and goods with a smile; when they pay for something they want the whole package. For this reason, organizations have tried to control not only the act of expressing emotions, but experiencing a negative emotion in the first place, known as the “transmutation of an emotional system,” (Hochsfield 1975: 19). Companies are aware of the impact their employees have on their customers and their decision to return to purchase from them again. Therefore, many organizations have implemented policies about controlling how employees should interpret situations in order to convey little appearance of annoyance or any other negative emotion (Hochsfield 1975). Managing emotion has become part of the requirements of a service job (Hochsfield 1975). For eight hours a day the individual must constantly control what

they are feeling and this can lead to a burden in other areas of their life. Hochschild (1975) suggests the worker is conditioned to ignore signals used to determine emotion, however, when not working, a lack of this signal could project the idea that the individual is unable to express their own feelings. Police officers learn to control their emotions on the street and these instincts transition into their home life. Depersonalization is another symptom associated with burnout, but is also related to other aspects of policing, such as getting into the police role. For some officers, this experience of burnout may pass, but for others it leads to early retirement and adds to the number of officers leaving the profession each year.

Social support has been researched as a facilitator of coping mechanisms but the family and personal troubles have been cited as the final source of stress for a police officer. When police officer recruits attend the police academy they learn invaluable skills that teach them how to survive on the street. One of the first things they need to do is understand and evolve into the role of the police officer (Violanti 1999). These women and men are socialized into the culture, just as children do when they are young. At the individual level, officers need to learn how to be emotionally detached from the situation at hand so they can perform their job, this depersonalization is opposite of what is required for personal relationships (Violanti 1999). Rugged individualism is described as the preference for officers to take control over their own situations, as they have to do on-duty, to prevent incidents from escalating (Beehr, Johnson, and Nieva 1995). Officers who detach and isolate themselves from family and friends experience a higher number of psychosomatic symptoms (Burke 1993). The officer's role in the family may call for emotion, but this depersonalization may lead to issues with the significant other or



children. Family members may view the officer as detached, this fissure can lead to stress within the police officer. Personal relationships within the family are not the only source of support for officers. The culture of policing, as described earlier, is important in alleviating stress within the job. However, if the officer is not accepted within the culture they may not get this support and may feel discriminated against within the department (Swatt et al., 2007; Gibson et al., 2001; Piquero 2005).

Discrimination within the job falls into this personal trouble category of stress. Piquero (2005) explores some of the gender differences in perceived stress within policing in her research. Female officers hear sexual jokes and profanity coming from their male counterparts and these are cited as a source of stress for females but had no effect in male officers (Piquero 2005). Male and female officers do not differ in the types of stressors felt within policing but they do exhibit a different degree to which they experience the stress. Males were more likely to report stressors inherent to police work and stress related to the media whereas females expressed that stressors related to their gender was more of a stressor for them (Piquero 2005).

### *Consequences of Stress in Policing*

Sergeants and other patrol officers that have contact with other officers on a regular basis may notice changes in the officers' behavior. These changes may have several factors involved, but felt stress can lead to on-the-job consequences that are not good for the individual, the department, or society. Long hours and shift work are two major contributors to fatigue which produce a slowed reaction time, tardiness, and in some cases, acts of aggression (Kerley 2005). Aggressive tactics can lead to excessive force and issues within the department or the media and this would add to the stress

experienced by the officer. Slowed reaction time is dangerous for both the officer and other officers in the department as they are unable to respond to a threat quick enough to prevent serious injury to any parties involved (Kerley 2005). Long term stress felt by the officer may get them in trouble with the department, thinking about transferring, or lead to choosing a different career (Kerley 2005). A high turnover rate is seen because of officers that leave before having three years on the job and the rates of an officer leaving within a year of a critical incident are higher than normal numbers (Stevens 2005; Kerley 2005).

Around five percent of officers leave policing every year. This number is similar to other occupations, but this figure has been tied to the effects of burnout within police officers (Kerley 2005). This relates to the exhaustion stage of stress which is an outcome of excessive stress over a long period of time. Psychologically, the officer may feel they are not equipped or have no energy to deal with daily tasks involved with being a police officer (Kerley 2005). Emotional exhaustion is a feeling experienced by those who work in careers that help other people and officers may become overwhelmed with helping citizens deal with their own emotions (Kerley 2005). Officers often experience compassion fatigue, in which the emotional cost becomes difficult (Figley 1999).

### *Family And Relationship Consequences Of Stress*

#### *Women in the Workplace*

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century large numbers of women began working outside the home in America (Women's International Center 2013). Increasingly, women have been heading into the job market out of necessity or desire. By the 1960's and 1970's about two-thirds of women were wage-earners and about 67 percent of these women held full-

time jobs (Hochschild and Machung 1989). Many of these new female workers were mothers at home and needed to maintain a balance in their lives. Experts have been referring to the “second shift” as time spent at home cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children after eight hours of wage-earning work (Hochschild and Machung 1989). Men and women attempt to share this work in the home but according to research there has been a disparity. Women work an extra 15 hours per week combining both work outside the home and within compared to their male counterparts (Hochschild and Machung 1989). Recent estimates suggest that men take on about one-fourth of the childcare and household responsibilities (Doherty and Beaton 2004). Gender role attitudes play a part in sharing both the daily and infrequent tasks required for a family.

Women completed more daily tasks within the home such as cooking, laundry, and bathing the children whereas men were more likely to mow the lawn and complete other sporadic chores (Hochschild and Machung 1989). This division of labor confines women to a fixed schedule. Dinner is at the same time every night and laundry needs to be done often to keep up with the amount of clothes used by the family. Men have more control over when they complete their tasks, their share of the work does not require daily completion (Hochschild and Machung 1989: 8). Many women can become stressed about the amount of time they spend working both outside and within the home. At times, they will be forced to make a decision between work, their children, or themselves whereas for men it is a common understanding that they will put work first (Hochschild and Machung 1989).

This division of labor is important because the majority of law enforcement officers are male. During the 1970's there was a large discrepancy in the percentage of

women represented in the law enforcement community (Sklansky 2006). Court-ordered quotas were put in place in the 1960's in many cities throughout the United States (Sklansky 2006). Departments with quotas saw a marked increase in the number of female officers in the 1980's and 1990's (Sklansky 2006). In the largest police departments during 2004 only 12.7% of sworn officers were women and the percentage of women in smaller agencies was even lower (Felperin 2004). The demographics of law enforcement officers has been changing over the years but the majority of officers are male. Dynamics of home life are impacted by the number of hours worked by both parties and what they contribute to the household. A relationship at home is not just about housework and taking care of the children. Relationships are important and are just as much work as cleaning and preparing meals. Interestingly, the quality of life at home is directly related to experiences in the workplace for couples (Roberts and Levenson 2001).

### *Police Officers and Family*

Individuals who enter the role of policing have formed a life and while developing relationships that formed before their career began. They may have a significant other, children, play in a sports league, or are an active member in their religion. There are certain aspects of police work that cause stress within the family and the family is also indirectly affected by stress felt by the officer (Kerley 2005). For example, shift work is inherent in policing and thus an unavoidable factor that families must confront when the officer begins their career. Different shifts pose distinct problems for the officers interacting with their home life. The afternoon shift begins around three and carries over into the night. Children get out of school at this time and depending on their age, this is

when vital family interaction occurs. Sports events occur after school hours, drama club activities, and homework is done all in the time between the end of school and bed time for children. Younger children are typically not awake when officers get home after 11pm. Some days they may have an arrest towards the end of the shift that leads to them getting home later than usual (Kirschman 2006). For an officer working the afternoon shift the best time they have to spend time with their children is on their days off and in the mornings before they get ready for school. It is important for families to establish times when they can all be together and to designate time for the significant other as well.

Officers working the night shift may be home in the morning with enough time to see their children before school and their significant other before they leave for work in the morning. Depending on the schedule of the spouse, the couple will often sleep at different times if the officer works the night shift. Not sharing the same bed together at night is difficult for one or both sides of the relationship. Spouses may worry that their officer may cheat on them because of the time spent alone. To date, there is no data that show police officers are more likely to cheat than those in professions where people spend long hours outside of the home and interact with the public, it really comes down to the individual (Miller 2007). Officers and their spouses need to openly communicate about their expectations in the marriage. However, spouses of police officers may continue to worry about their loved one.

Danger is inherent in the career of policing and it is something that the officer cannot avoid. Family members need to understand that the job is not only filled with critical incidents, but there are more routine matters such as report writing that fill the shift of an officer. When an officer feels overwhelmed in stress from the job they may

turn to their spouse for emotional support (Violanti 1996). If two officers are married they will understand the expectations and culture of the police profession. This is positive and comforting, but it can also magnify the negative effects in the family (Figley 1999). Nevertheless, the officer will experience stressful situations throughout their career and will need to learn to separate the job from family life. Paranoia and control are two characteristics used by officer families to describe their police officer (Beehr et al, 1995). This is attributed to the police role necessary for a successful career. As discussed earlier, depersonalization is essential for police work but is damaging if this carries over into the family. After a long and stressful shift the officer may not want to come home and listen to the troubles had by the spouse during the day. In one study, male executives reported more stress when their wife said that her husband let his work spillover into the home (Beehr et al., 1995).

The impact of work in family life has been studied in recent years and one study asked officers and their spouses to keep daily diaries of their lives. Roberts and Levenson (2001) researched ways in which families were impacted by work life and centered their study around the idea that marriages with large amounts of negative affect, full spectrum of negative emotions, and low amounts of positive affect often lead to dissatisfaction and in many cases, divorce. Individuals experience more negative emotions after a day of extreme stress (Roberts and Levenson 2001). Increased arousal brought on by the release of stress hormones can make it more difficult for an individual to think clearly, which is troubling for interpersonal relationships (Roberts and Levenson 2001). Physical exhaustion was discussed earlier in the chapter and is also relevant in the interaction within marriages. Fatigue and lack of sleep lead to the individual being more

anxious and angry while at the same time being less cheerful than normal (Roberts and Levenson 2001). If this continues in the long-term the couple may experience days filled with more negative affect than they do positive emotions. This same study found that physically exhausting days and days with high stress had two distinct effects on the spouses (Roberts and Levenson 2001). Negative effects were seen in an officer after a stressful day at work, these can lead to marital distress and there were few positive emotions reported by either the officer or spouse on these days (Roberts and Levenson 2001). In comparison, on days when officers were physically exhausted, spouses were not physiologically affected in the same ways in which they are on high stress days (Roberts and Levenson 2001). One explanation of this is that spouses feel they must be ready for intense emotional interactions on high stress days, but days when officers are physically exhausted felt less dangerous to the spouse (Roberts and Levenson 2001). Therefore, on days with great physical exhaustion and reciprocity of positive affect the general climate of the relationship is more positive than it is on other days (Roberts and Levenson 2001). Even though this study showed that stress can lead to marital issues, police officers are still able to have positive relationships with their spouses.

Physical exhaustion may prevent the officer from having the energy at the end of the day to complete household tasks such as mowing the lawn, doing laundry, or taking the children to play dates. Exhaustion may occur when officers choose to over-commit themselves to police work. There are three reasons a police officer may over-commit themselves, the first is an over-identification of the police role (Miller 2007). The prestige surrounding the career of police officers gives them a sense of pride and they feel they should represent this throughout all aspects of their life (Miller 2007). However,

being in “cop mode” all hours of the day is exhausting and can lead to burnout. The officer needs to find a balance between being a dedicated police officer and taking time off to rest both mentally and physically. The second reason that officers may over-commit themselves is because they feel insecure about their status as a police officer and think that they have to constantly prove themselves (Miller 2007). Overtime is often available in many police departments around the country and this offers the officers high hourly rates while at the same taking away time spent with the family. If officers do not take their share of overtime they are at times looked down upon by their coworkers (Miller 2007). The final reason officers may over-commit themselves is to give themselves a break from life at home (Miller 2007). In this case, the home is seen as a stressor and working often gets them away from dealing with marital issues.

A common myth is that police officers have a higher divorce rate than other professions. In fact, if police families survive the first three years of the marriage, the divorce rate is no higher than the general population (Miller 2007). The experiences of these families may have a positive impact in the long-term as police marriages tend to be more stable and enduring than other marriages (Miller 2007). These families experience difficulties related to policing in their daily life that have social and physiological effects within the marriage (Kerley 2005). Even though these issues are prevalent in the marital relationship, the research has not proven that this leads to divorce at a higher rate than any other occupation, but further investigation is necessary.

#### *Physical and Emotional Consequences Of Stress*

Physical and emotional consequences of stress are studied and are similar across occupations. At the individual level, officers may partake in activities with negative



outcomes as a result of their felt stress and they may suffer from many of the health symptoms related to long-term stress (Kerley 2005). Many officers need to pass rigorous physical fitness exams to enter the police academy. The academy is the six-month long training that details each of the basic techniques and skills that are required for officers on the job. Officers are pushed to their limits in the police academy so that when they finish, they are at peak mental and physical fitness. One factor found in police research has been the lack of exercise with officers leading to high percentages of body fat and being overweight later in their career (Kerley 2005).

Research conducted in the 1980's showed that 86 percent of police officers did not exercise regularly and a combination of this with other factors led to classifying 25 percent of the officers as overweight (Kerley 2005). Lack of exercise is correlated with negative activities deriving from excessive stress felt by the individual (Kerley 2005). Not only are these officers missing out on the positive effects of exercise, but physical inactivity also leads to poor overall health.

Continued research into the late 1990's verified that physical inactivity was one reason why law enforcement officers experience health problems related to cardiac disease, smoking, lung cancer, and depression more frequently than the general population (Kerley 2005). People who are moderately overweight have an increased risk for high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and heart problems (Bogers et al 2007: 1725). In these cases, stress felt by the police officers directly impacts their overall wellness. However, physical inactivity and an increase in body fat are not the only contributors to the poor health of officers. Officers who had spent more time at their present job had used a higher number of sick days than those who have changed positions (Burke 1993).

### *Negative Coping Mechanisms*

Officers often develop behaviors to counteract stress from all aspects of their life and these are known as coping mechanisms. At times, these mechanisms are either positive or negative. They partake in these behaviors, such as smoking and drinking, with the intent on relieving the symptoms of stress (Beehr et al., 1995). The two options of externalizing or internalizing stress are used to describe ways officers handle stress. Externalizing stress often leads to the officer taking out their anger and frustration on others while internalizing stress can lead to serious mental and physical damage to the individual (Gibson, Swatt, and Jolicouer 2001). Research on police officer stress finds that if there is no outlet available to externalize stress for the officer their frustration can lead to rage and physical violence (Gibson, Swatt, and Jolicouer 2001).

### *Physical Violence*

Officers that get to the point of rage tend to have more departmental complaints against them for excessive force and issues releasing their hostilities in the home (Gibson, Swatt, and Jolicouer 2001). The officer's intent when externalizing and venting was to lessen the amount of felt stress, but this leads to negative effects as well. Strain has a negative effect on domestic violence, officers that experienced high levels of strain were more likely to admit committing domestic violence (Gibson, Swatt, and Jolicouer 2001). Violence within the home is connected with the inability to cope as anger and depression were also positively correlated with domestic violence (Gibson, Swatt, and Jolicouer 2001). White and less experienced officers have higher rates of anger than other demographics (Gibson, Swatt, and Jolicouer 2001). Anger has the highest influence on rates of domestic violence (Gibson, Swatt, and Jolicouer 2001).

### *Smoking*

In the late 1990's almost one-third of officers studied reported smoking cigarettes and studies continue to show that police officers smoke tobacco at a higher rate than the general population (Kerley 2005; Smith et al 2005). The authors attributed this rate as one facet to the police lifestyle. Stress is one contributing factor to this increase in smoking percentage, but people who work in all types of jobs that require shift work have a rate of use higher than the general population (Smith et al 2005).

### *Alcohol*

Alcohol use by police officers is increasingly studied by researchers across several disciplines (Beehr et al., 1995; Burke 1993). Consumption is tied to both daily stressors of the job as well as the rare critical incidents (Stevens 2005). The common thread between the types of stressors that influence alcohol use by police officers stems from reduced self-respect (Stevens 2005). Daily stressors such as lack of support from supervisors and a disrespect shown to law enforcement by the general population had the largest impact on alcohol use by police officers studied (Stevens 2005). In terms of critical incident stressors, the harming of another officer or of a civilian leads to reduced self-respect and subsequent alcohol use (Stevens 2005).

There are two ways to approach alcohol consumption by law enforcement officers. The first way involves explaining the consumption as an emotion-focused approach to dealing with stress. Emotion-focused coping occurs when the individual attempts to reduce the amount of felt strain (Beehr et al., 1995). In this case, if alcohol is effective in reducing the stress the officer feels it can be considered a positive coping mechanism (Beehr et al., 1995). Drinking alcohol is beneficial in terms of the fact that it

may temporarily reduce stress, but at other times it can become another stressor for the individual.

The amount of alcohol consumed aids in determining whether alcohol has a positive or negative impact on coping (Beehr et al., 1995). Reports show that unmarried/single officers of a low rank are likely to drink more alcoholic beverages than others in the department (Burke 1993). Rugged individualism is correlated with amount of alcohol consumption, most likely because this is accepted by the police culture (Beehr et al., 1995). Officers have been known to consume alcohol after work while discussing the job (Beehr et al., 1995). The problem has been studied by several researchers over the years and Police Chiefs have been cited as saying there is a severe problem with alcohol consumption within their police department (Kerley 2005).

Alcohol abuse by a police officer has physical, emotional, and organizational consequences. At the physical level officers can experience a wide range of difficulties including alcoholism and chronic fatigue (Swatt et al., 2007). Excessive alcohol use has been linked to liver damage and obesity (Swatt et al., 2007). Rates of police officers dying from liver disease are double than what they are for the general population (Swatt et al., 2007). Of course, those are some of the extreme consequences of alcohol abuse by officers.

Misuse of alcohol by police officers is damaging to their careers and their department. A study conducted in 1979 found that of the officers sampled, 67 percent admitted to drinking at one point while they were on duty (Swatt et al., 2007). These officers are a poor representation of their department and can become a liability. Law enforcement officers that drink on the job put themselves, civilians, and their fellow

patrol officers in danger. However, many officers that abuse alcohol do not drink on duty but their behavior also impacts the police department. Poor work performance is associated with heavy drinking of alcohol (Swatt et al., 2007).

The inability to regulate emotions and low self-esteem account for the emotional impact of alcohol abuse (Swatt et al., 2007). Ironically, the officers attempt to improve their psychological well-being by drinking alcohol and yet it actually leads to more problems in a good number of cases (Swatt et al., 2007). In regards to the family, high alcohol consumption is linked to low affection given to children of the officer (Stevens 2005).

When officers internalize stress they often turn to alcohol as a solution and to help soothe these psychological issues (Swatt et al., 2007). This internalization is one of the reasons officers end up with many physically and mentally debilitating health issues. Heart attacks, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicide have been linked to internalization patterns by the officers (Swatt et al., 2007).

#### *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Suicide*

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in military personnel and veterans has been a topic researched heavily in recent years (Haisch and Meyers 2004; Stevens 2005). PTSD is an anxiety disorder in which a person was previously “exposed to a traumatic event which involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others, and response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror” (Haisch and Meyers 2004: 223). One study showed that almost half of all officers in a study experienced frequent flashbacks for 6 months after critical and traumatic incidents (Kerley 2005). Individuals experiencing this disorder internalize their

feelings in response to the stress. Avoidance strategies used by people suffering from PTSD include avoiding thoughts or feelings about the trauma, avoidance of activities that remind the person of the trauma, detachment from others, and a restricted range of affect (Haisch and Meyers 2004: 223). Cynicism and authoritarianism can lead to difficulty within the family for sufferers of PTSD (Haisch and Meyers 2004). Many of the strategies listed are similar to those experienced by people enduring the burnout phase of stress.

As stated earlier, many of the people experiencing burnout from a critical incident do not stay on the force for an extended period of time. This is one explanation as to why officers between the age of 25 and 39 suffer more impairment and PTSD symptoms than those who are older and with more experience, the older officers made it through the severe stress during the first few years on the job (Haisch and Meyers 2004). Experience was an important factor in the incidence of stress for several studies, these officers learn to cope with both daily and critical incident stressors (Haisch and Meyers 2004). Officers that were exposed to a higher number of critical incidents had a greater number of symptoms of PTSD compared to those who responded to fewer critical incidents during their career (Violanti 1996).

The use of avoidance coping strategies by officers makes them more than twice as likely to develop PTSD than those who use other coping mechanisms (Haisch and Meyers 2004). Misuse of alcohol and drugs is higher in officers scoring high on measures of PTSD than officers with fewer symptoms (Haisch and Meyers 2004). Personality traits such as neuroticism, openness, and extraversion influence the type of coping strategies used by officers (Haisch and Meyers 2004). Neuroticism in officers

was linked to those who found pressures within the organization as the most stressful (Haisch and Meyers 2004). Research on coping measures used by police officers requires further research to understand these connections.

If these law enforcement officers do not use positive coping mechanisms, the extreme stress sometimes leads to officers committing suicide. Research on this topic has been plentiful in recent years and there is a fair amount of data that show the rate of suicide is higher than that of the general population (Kerley 2005). A prominent researcher and former police officer, John Violanti, refers to suicide as an epidemic within law enforcement (1996). It has been theorized that suicide is more of a risk to police officers than other potential hazards encountered in the line of duty (Violanti 1996). There are four risk factors for suicide including psychological problems, alcohol abuse, stress and trauma, and relationship difficulties (Violanti 1996). Interestingly, police officer suicides in New York City are more common in the age range from 35 to 54 (Violanti 1996). This counteracts the finding that younger, less experienced officers experience more stress than those with more years on the job. One possible explanation for this is the numbing and detachment associated with policing. Emotional numbing is connected to extreme stress with an individual and this can lead to a feeling that death is the solution to their situation (Violanti 1996).

### *Positive Coping Mechanisms*

Many positive coping mechanisms are described as problem-focused in which the individual targets the source of the stressor and deals with that as a way to reduce stress (Beehr et al., 1995). Planning is a technique used by people in order to address the stressors in their life (Haisch and Meyers 2004). Studies show that people with higher

scores on PTSD tests were less likely to use planning as a coping mechanism (Haisch and Meyers 2004). Planning for a police officer ranges from what to do in police situations and how to deal with the effects on the family. Having a plan in place for when an officer gets tied up on an arrest at the end of a shift can prevent stress for the officer and the family. Looking inward on what the officer can do to benefit themselves has been identified as a positive coping strategy (Stevens 2005).

Aspects of an individual's lifestyle can promote emotional and overall well-being (Burke 1993). Exercise is an emotion-focused coping technique that is beneficial to people in several different ways. Emotion-focused coping techniques were found to reduce drinking, divorce, and suicide rates of police officers (Beehr et al., 1995). Law enforcement officers that exercised more smoked fewer cigarettes (Burke 1993). This reduces the negative effects of cigarette smoking while at the same time offering the mental and physical benefits of exercise.

Social support in itself as a coping technique requires more research, but it is important in facilitation of the major forms of coping (Agnew 1992). Officers with a higher amount of social support were less likely to be angry or depressed (Gibson et al., 2001). Social support does not decrease the likeliness of domestic violence (Gibson et al., 2001). Interestingly, people providing social support can either promote or constrain both negative or positive coping mechanisms used by a person (Beehr et al., 1995). A couple may partake in the same coping activities such as drinking or exercise. The religiosity of one person in a couple was primarily effective in reducing the amount of stress felt by the other individual (Beehr et al., 1995). Religiosity is considered either emotion-focused or problem- focused depending on how the person engages with their



religion (Beehr et al., 1995). Studies have found that coping mechanisms used by the spouse impacts the effectiveness of the officer's own coping techniques (Beehr et al., 1995). High alcohol consumption by one spouse is correlated with avoidance coping strategies used by the other (Beehr et al., 1995).

### *Current Study*

The combination of stressors from both the policing career as well as the officers' life at home is a relationship that has not been researched as heavily as other stressors related to policing. Stress from work interfering with home life often discusses depersonalization but leaves out other aspects in the life of the officer with their family (Violanti 1999). The significant other and their children provide a way for officers to relieve the stress they feel on the job but can also contribute to their stress if they are unable to accomplish everything that is expected from them at home. This delicate relationship must be studied to understand the balance the police officer attempts to maintain throughout their career.

There is also limited research on positive coping techniques that would be beneficial for police officers. Specifically, the role of social support provided by the spouse needs further research to understand the positive and negative influences. In this study I interviewed police officers and their spouses from a medium-sized police department in the northeast to determine what coping mechanisms are used by both officers and their spouses. Knowing what works well for some officers will benefit the other officers in the department.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

The areas of study surrounding police officer stress have collected a bulk of quantitative data representing specific situations (Kerley 2005). This current research centers around the individual stories of police officers in one department. I performed qualitative interviews with police officers and their significant others in order to receive a thick description of events experienced by the police officers in the study (Rubin and Rubin 1995). In-depth interviews allow for elaboration on comments and personal stories that offer insight into this challenging profession. This study, number 13062, was granted approval by the Human Subjects Review Committee at Union College in October of 2013.

### *Sample Selection*

Recruitment of participants for this study are from a medium-sized police department in the Northeastern United States. This department is an ideal size to allow for officers to feel comfortable interviewing without fear that their thoughts and experiences would get back to the rest of the officers. A sample of thirteen adults were interviewed for the study, ten are police officers and three are their significant others. Interviews were voluntary and any names used in this thesis are pseudonyms. Participants were first recruited using the convenience sampling technique, those that are easily accessible, and evolving into snowball sampling, in which participants suggest others that may be interested in the study (Berg 2004).

The researcher contacted the first participants by phone or in person based on their availability and schedule. In this first round of interviews the intention was to

contact as many police officers available at the time with no regard for demographic information. The evolution into the next round of recruiting was inevitable in order to reach a higher number of officers in the department. The first officers were asked of anyone they thought would be interested in a possible interview. These recommended subjects were either left voicemails on their private work line or given a hard copy of a brief overview of the study and contact information.

Before patrol officers begin their shift on the road they all attend a briefing in order to understand what happened before they came into work and activities in the area they need to be conscious of during their shift. These briefings occur before each of the three shifts in this department, at seven in the morning, three in the afternoon, and eleven at night. The only exception to this schedule is the “early car” in which a handful of officers begin before the regularly scheduled 7am-3pm, 3pm-11pm, or 11pm-7am shifts. I attended three total briefings in a span of four days in order to reach the highest number of people possible without repeatedly speaking to the same individuals. The first briefing I attended took place on a Thursday night at 10 pm because that is when the highest number of officers attend briefing for that shift. The patrol Sergeant in charge of that shift reads over the details that the officers will need to know and any special attention items that need to be addressed. When the Sergeant finished I was introduced to the group and was given a short period of time to speak to the patrol officers. I began by introducing myself and gave a brief overview of what the study is about, how long interviews last, and informing them that interviews are completely voluntary. A description of the study, my contact information, the contact information for my thesis advisor, and the contact information for the Union College Human Subjects Review

Committee were distributed to each officer. The officers were told that if they were interested in an interview they could contact myself at any time to schedule an appointment. This same procedure took place for the morning and afternoon shift on the Sunday immediately following the first Thursday briefing I attended. Extra copies of the description of my study were left with the Sergeant in case there was anyone interested that did not attend briefing. The significant others involved in the study were either approached directly or were given information about the study to see if they were interested and told to contact me. In order to reach a more representative sample I left contact information for the few minorities and women in the department.

### *Operationalization and Measurement*

Interviews were conducted with all thirteen of the subjects in the study and took place in an environment in which they felt comfortable. They were made aware that interviews were completely voluntary, no names were kept of those who participated or declined to participate.

The first set of questions addressed the demographic and family information about the particular applicant. See Appendix B for a complete list of interview questions for police officers and Appendix C for a list of questions posed to significant others. These answers will create a profile of each respondent in order to compare the sample to the population studied. The next few questions discuss their current position in the department in terms of rank and seniority. In this section, jobs held by the officer prior to their current career are addressed in order to discuss the importance of life experience and transitioning into the police field.

Questions about stress were first asked when delving into their early years as a police officer after attending the police academy. During this stage officers were asked a variety of questions about their first few years on the job. This includes how they managed their time, what was the most stressful aspect of the early years, and some of the positives and negatives of working each shift. The next set of questions ask about stress involved in policing and how they recuperate after critical incidents. Not only are they asked to reflect on how these situations have impacted themselves but also the repercussions felt by the family. After asking them directly about some things they think act as stress relievers the next set of questions is centered around their personal health and exercise. If the officer interviewed held a higher rank than a patrol officer they were asked a series of questions about the challenging aspects of their rank. The interview was then concluded with questions about resources available in the department to deal with stress as well as the interaction between the officer and the family after a stressful incident.

The interview questions were directed in such a way that they would elicit in-depth responses on the types of stressors and how these affect both themselves and their families.

### *Data Analytic Strategy and Procedures*

Interviews were scheduled during a time that was convenient for the respondent and took place in a location in which they were comfortable. See Appendix A for the informed consent form signed before the interviews began. Interviews lasted between thirty minutes to an hour and a half. Interviewees were asked if the session could be

tape-recorded and all but one agreed, in that case extensive notes were taken during the interview. Each interview was then transcribed and coded based on categories and then by specific keywords. For example, a category is “stressors inherent to policing” and one of the keywords is “sleep.” Each keyword evolved from finding similarities among the answers during the interviews. From these codes I made a chart to map the demographic information of the respondent and quotations that could be used for each category that was coded. This chart demonstrates the similarities and differences between the interviewees and responses given. Conclusions were drawn based on both the coded interviews and the chart.

## Chapter 4: Analysis

### *Overview of the Department*

The police department used in this study is located in the Northeastern United States and has a basic rank structure. The Chief of Police is in charge of the entire department, but there are two Deputy Chiefs that take care of either the field or administrative services. Below the Deputy Chiefs are six Lieutenants, each assigned a specific patrol division or unit within the department. As of January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013 the top nine officers in the department were all white males with extensive law enforcement experience. The fourteen sergeants in charge of patrol, investigations, or administrative services are all males. Of the nineteen investigators in the department there is one female and of the 65 patrol and community services officers five of them are female.

No female officers or minority officers agreed to interview for this study. However, the percentage of female and minority officers in this department is lower than national averages. With a total of 107 officers in the department, women make up just 5.6% of the sample population which is much lower than the national average of 12% in 2004 (Felperin 2004). The sample included officers with a wide range of ages, years of experience, and rank within the department. Although none of the officers worked the day shift at the time of the interview, six of them had worked the day shift in previous years therefore each shift was represented in the study. All but three of these officers attended the academy that is currently used to train new recruits.

### *Hiring and The Academy*

Similar to other civil service positions, this police department requires potential

recruits to take a civil service exam in order to be considered for employment. The scores on the exam are used to determine the order in which people will be contacted to complete the next phases of the hiring process. Steven, a patrol officer with just one and a half years on the job describes this entire process as one that requires you to stay in the area because you don't know when you'll be called. He says that even after you get hired and you are to begin the police academy you cannot exhale or “to take a step back and collect and be like I did a good job there, you have the next thing” (Steven).

All of the officers in the sample that attended the police academy within the past 20 years discussed similar emotions and experiences that took place during the academy phase of the hiring process. The first two weeks in the academy are commonly referred to as “Hell Week.” A 41 year old investigator named Thomas said it was:

Very stressful those two weeks, didn't eat, didn't sleep. Couldn't sleep because you were literally anticipating the next morning. Gotta get your boots shined, uniformed pressed, gotta fix your hair.

Each of the officers described similar experiences during that phase. A typical day for them would start by getting their boots shined, ironing their uniforms and be on their way to the academy by 6:30 in the morning. The academy is technically from 8 am until 4pm, but as Jackson, a seasoned midnight patrol officer said, the day is actually much longer, and that is part of the problem.

Jackson said that recruits had to be in formation and present their colors before 8 o'clock in the morning and that they had to clean up the training facility before they left at 4pm. This veteran discussed the exorbitant amount of homework and preparation each recruit would have to do the night before a day in the academy. By the time they got to the academy each morning they were already exhausted before being put through



physical training activities such as pushups and calisthenics. Then part of the day was dedicated to classes, but this lack of sleep and the amount of pressure on these recruits led to exhaustion. “They fatigue you to the point where you can't even focus anymore. I mean you looked around and there were guys falling asleep because they were so tired,” that is how Jackson described these classes that were intended to help these future police officers.

Each of the police officers said that they expected to be yelled and pushed to their mental, physical, and emotional limits. An investigator with his Master's degree described his initial mindset in the academy:

It's crazy. Like you have to figure, the first week you're there they just yell at you for no reason. I remember coming home from the academy being like oh my God what did I get myself into. If there's 6 months of this, this is crazy. (Sean).

Part of this could be related to teaching these individuals to control their emotions. As discussed in the literature review this police academy serves as a way to socialize these recruits and mold them into police officers that can perform tasks on the street when under stress.

This idea of performing under pressure is one explanation for the ridiculous tasks asked of the recruits while in the academy. They are constantly being screamed at while they are attempting to finish something assigned to them by their training officers. Jackson recalls one specific event that contributes to this idea of breaking you down and putting you under pressure.

I remember one time they ripped up, they put 2 sheets of paper on everybody's desk. And I had 57 people in my class. So that's 114 pieces of paper. They ripped them all up, they said you have to pick up all the pieces of paper, tiny pieces, within a minute. And there's a front row and they throw it towards the chalkboard

and they say you have to pick the ones in the front up but you can't go around the desks. They said you need to stay behind the desks. Like crawl under the desk and keep your feet behind the desk and somehow pick all the paper up, but of course you can't. (Jackson)

All of these things contribute to what officers described as “the worst 6 months of my entire life” (Jackson). After explaining why the police academy was rough for them, all but one officer admitted that they understood the purpose of the academy, to break you down and build you back up. The other officer said that the six month academy was pointless.

The training officers are there to prepare the recruits for things they will experience in their career. This type of intense training is similar to what people pursuing their *Juris Doctorate* undertake in the first year of law school. The rigor of coursework and everything involved is to show students that you're going to have to put a lot of hours into this job to be successful down the road. During the first year of law school they are given a towering amount of reading and writing and this can weed out a lot of students that are not prepared to take on a career in law. One of the officers recognized that this was a goal of the police academy as well. A man named Carter came to policing after an 8 year career in another field and had three kids and a wife when he attended the police academy. He understood the screaming and pressure, “I get it, why they need to do that, because the 24 year old kid, who thinks that they're going to come in here and be a cop and crack skulls. They gotta get that out of you, they gotta knock that right out of your system” (Carter). The officers would agree that policing is not a job for everyone that can pass the civil service exam and physical tests and the academy is another line of defense in preventing individuals from taking on a career in policing when they are either not ready or when it is not a good fit for them.

*Does the Academy Prepare them for the Road?*

Jackson does not think the current format of the 6 month long academy is the best way to prepare someone for a career in policing, “They try to teach you how to be a police officer in an academy that's not hands on.” In a way, the department realizes that these new officers cannot immediately take on all the roles as an officer once they leave the academy and that is why the department has a 12 week field training program. This program assigns a trained and experienced officer to teach and mentor the new officers on the road. The new officer spends three weeks on each shift to learn how to handle calls and respond to situations they learned about in books at the academy. Juan, a patrol sergeant for the midnight shift, said that you learn more in field training in three months than you did in the six month academy.

However, this field training can be a stressful time for the new officers as well.

Jackson noted that:

In field training you're riding next to a guy who has probably been there for 10-15 years it's also a little unnerving. Some guys are really friendly but some are actually just complete assholes. Complete assholes that don't care about the program and they shouldn't be doing it but no one says anything. Can't go to any of the day guys if you need help, and even a lot of the afternoon guys don't want to be bothered.

Luckily, the new officer is paired with a different officer from each shift so they can learn valuable information from several experienced officers.

This hectic schedule of switching shifts every few weeks for three months can challenge personal relationships with a spouse and with children. During this time the officer cannot take time off unless it is an unforeseen emergency. They may miss out on family gatherings, their own honeymoon, their children's sports games, or dinners with

the family. Investigator Thomas said of this crucial time:

You have your own set of expectations on what kind of a cop you want to be. You have expectations from your family on what they think you should be and you have expectations from your coworkers on what they think you should be”  
(Thomas).

In a sense, you have the department in one ear and your family in the other and the new officer must find a balance between learning this new job which they had worked so hard to get while also being a husband or a father. This tumultuous time served as the final breaking point between Jackson and a former girlfriend who could not deal with the changing shifts and long hours associated with the field training process.

All of the officers interviewed could relate to the stressful experiences of handling calls on the road once they come off of field training. The most common source of stress during this time was getting a call that you did not know how to handle. As a relatively new patrol officer, Steven admits:

You go to work now and you don't know as much as you want to know or you need to know. When you go on these calls people are counting on you, people need you.

The public looks towards these law enforcement officers in times of distress, they assume the officer knows what they are doing and that they will be calm throughout the situation. Every day is different for these officers though and each shift brings on a new set of challenges. For this reason the officer may not know what to do because they haven't experienced that type of call before. The good thing is that most of the time these newer officers are given dozens of cell phone numbers from other veteran officers to call in case they find themselves in a situation where they do not know what to do and they don't want to make a mistake. Rather than call a Sergeant these new officers will reach out to

one of these patrol officers with more experience. Knowing that these new officers had that ability to ask questions made them feel more comfortable in the department and on the road. Seeking advice from other officers is a common coping mechanism used by newer officers in this department. The way Jackson sees it, now as a veteran officer he wants to help the patrol officers with what they need because he doesn't want to see anyone get hurt and he has to work with the person for another twelve years. Big calls in this department often necessitate more than one officer to respond to the scene. If these younger officers do not know what they're doing at these calls they can put the lives of themselves, other officers, or the public in danger. That is the way that the veteran officers need to view this period where a new officer is learning the job.

This inexperience on the part of new officers can be stressful for the veteran officers as well. Paul, a patrol officer with six and a half years of experience has been working on midnights and says that having these inexperienced officers on a call can be stressful because if something big happens, he wants them to respond and know how to act. Not knowing what to do is a source of stress for these new officers and it leads to stress in veteran officers as well. Juan, the midnight sergeant, talks about being responsible for some of these new officers because he knows they are going to make mistakes. Many of those interviewed said similar things about this, consider Paul's answer to his first few years on the job: "I knew I was going to make mistakes, I had no problem with that as long as I learned from my mistakes."

These mistakes can have major consequences for the officer, the department, and the citizens involved. Similarly to a new doctor during their residency, they are still learning while practicing and if they make a mistake it can have tangible and dangerous

ramifications. Decisions that doctors and police officers make can be magnified based on what is at stake. In the emergency room a doctor may need to make a life-or-death decision on how to treat a patient with a major injury. This decision needs to be made quickly, the patient and their family may be relying on the doctor to use their best judgment and they expect them to be calm. Seeing the doctor calm in this situation can bring a little relief to the family just as seeing a police officer pull up on a dangerous scene can feel for a person who is in distress. People are relying on them, but the doctor may have never had a similar case to this and they need to act now. Police officers can be faced with these decisions everyday. It takes time to experience different types of calls and situations and after a while the officer starts to understand the job and what is expected of them.

#### *Not New, but Not a Veteran*

For every career there is a learning curve, you're not going to be great at your job in your first year. Part of this is building confidence in what you know about handling different situations. Officers were asked how long they thought it took them to get a firm grasp of what they were doing. The average response was between three and four years after finishing the police academy. Now, these individuals admitted that there are still calls today, after 7 or 10 years of experience, that still challenge their knowledge of the job and they may not be entirely sure of the best option. However, as Jackson stated, by that time you should never go into a call and have no clue what to do, you have a baseline of what to do for different types of calls and you may still have questions because you may have never encountered that situation before.

### *Getting More Experience*

Connecting the experiences at the police academy, field training, and the first few years on the job there are important as there are implications and connections among the three phases. The police academy is a classroom based learning experience with the goals of teaching the penal law and making the recruits strong mentally, physically, and emotionally. There is no doubt as to how important these tools are for the police officer on the street, but as Jackson said, you can't teach this type of job without being hands-on. If one purpose of the police academy is to find out who is unfit for the job then there should be a hiring process that assesses this information. Spending time breaking these young men and women down takes away from the valuable allocated time given to train these recruits. Learning how to respond to calls and specific situations takes place in the twelve week field training after the academy but even after this, the officer does not have a strong handle on what they are doing for another three or four years.

The lack of confidence and inexperience leads to high amounts of stress within the officer the first couple of years on the job. Organizational and policy changes about the way these recruits are trained may alleviate some of the stress felt by these officers. An idea that cannot be overstated is that this job brings something new everyday, so how can this department prepare these officers for working the road? You cannot teach them everything they will need to know on every call, but they can be taught basic procedures for the most common calls and how to prioritize and handle the more difficult calls for service. Just as a mathematician learns how to solve complicated questions, they know how to use formulas and what order of operations they are to take to come to a correct answer, officers can have a basic understanding of how to control a scene.

### *Special Services Team*

The more experiences these officers get the more they understand how to respond to different calls and handle the situation. One way to gain experience and get more training on the job is by trying out for and joining the Special Services Team (SST). This is essentially the SWAT Team of the department that responds to various types of calls such as barricaded subjects, building searches, and narcotic raids. Officers in the department need to have a minimum of four years on the job before they can try out for the team. Once they get on the team they have full days of training twice a month that offer a wide range of opportunities to learn different and unique situations the team may experience. This team is important for the individual officer in several ways; they learn more about the job, they interact with a diverse group of officers, and they have a chance to gain a leadership position on the team. Each of the officers interviewed for this study that are on the SST or had been on it in the past gave recognition to the importance of joining the team in their learning and development of crucial skills on the job. To be on the team brings respect to the officer and allows them to grow and expand their career. Noah, a current Lieutenant and Oliver, a Sergeant stated that this team actually led to other officers in the department respecting them when they were still on patrol. This respect eventually carried on as both of these men rose up through the ranks in the department but they could each point to this team as an important step for them as a police officer and a leader.

### *The Unknown*

Calls aren't so stressful, it's the unknown is what's stressful. You don't know what you're actually going to. Ill say this, you could be going to someone who calls in, "oh I need help because someone is harassing me," but you have no idea what that



person..it could sound like harassment over the air but that person could be sitting in a house with a gun waiting for you to walk in. You just never know. (Jackson).

Officer Jackson sums up the way that many of the officers interpret the inherent dangerous aspects of their job. They are trained to handle situations and after gaining experience they understand how to respond and what to do on a wide array of calls. However, as the research states, the unknown in police work can be the most stressful facet of the job (Violanti and Aron 1995). Police officers need to be prepared for the situation that Jackson describes above. Some of the critical incidents the officers were involved in make them safer because they expect that sort of occurrence on what can be thought of as a routine call.

Becoming complacent could lead to death in this job, walking up to a traffic stop may seem like an every day task for these officers. However, when walking up to the car the officer has no idea who or what he is about to deal with in the car. Lieutenant Noah remarks that the unknown continues after you reach the car in this situation and after you respond to a call, you're there but you have to figure out what is going on. Even Investigator Zachary, the man with the most amount of years as a police officer out of this sample says that the unknown is the most stressful part of the job. When you don't know how bad something is or what exactly is going on it is difficult for the officer no matter how many years they have on the job.

Now if you combine the unknown with the other stressors described in this section by the officers: lack of sleep, improper eating, problems at home, issues with the department, and being new, these can all affect the officer in ways which they may not be aware. Their reaction time may be slower or they may not know what to do in that situation. The stressor of the unknown cannot be examined just as one piece, but as one

portion of a pie that makes the job of policing stressful.

As discussed earlier, one way to combat the stress brought on by the unknown in police work is through planning (Haisch and Meyers 2004). Police officers will not have a complete understanding of the situation until they arrive on scene and figure it out. However, planning on what they will do before they get to the scene will help them sort through what they know about the call and what they should do first when they get there.

### *The Added Stressors of Rank*

Several of the officers talked about long term plans and goals in which they hoped to increase their rank in the department. Some have already reached the position they have coveted and worked hard to achieve. Many of these new roles bring on added stressors on top of those already described in the chapter.

As stated earlier, one of the coping strategies used by all the officers was talking to someone and often this meant talking to another officer. The Sergeants and the Lieutenant that were interviewed for this study describe a transition into their rank, a current status in which they do not have as close of a support network in the department as they had when they were patrol officers.

When patrol officers are promoted to Sergeant they are given a separate locker room as a place to change that is attached to the locker room used for the large number of patrol officers. Sergeant Juan sees the importance of keeping the locker rooms separate, a lot of discussion about the Sergeants or the administration occurs when officers are changing in the locker rooms. In a way this alienates the Sergeants, places them above the rest of their patrolman.

The Sergeants comment about how they have trouble disciplining people who they consider their friends in the department. Even the wives of the Sergeants interviewed commented on how that specific situation, reprimanding a friend, can bring extra stress and worry on their husbands. The wives said that they can tell when their husbands are thinking about it in their heads and they often bounce ideas off of them. Including their wives in decision making takes place because as a Sergeant many of their friends are still patrolman and they cannot go talk to their friends about this issue. It isn't acceptable for someone in a managerial position to talk to their subordinates about other officers. Sergeants lose that source of coping that was so prevalent for the other officers. In this case they say they reach out to other Sergeants to see how they would handle certain situations.

The Lieutenant said that the jump from Sergeant to Lieutenant was much more drastic than it was from patrol to Sergeant. As a Lieutenant they are considered part of the administration, the powerful who are imposing rules and policies in which the patrol officers may not agree. Since there are only five Lieutenants in the department it can also be a very alienating position. Lieutenant Noah admitted that his interaction with officers diminished outside of work after the promotion. One specific item that the Lieutenant referred to was the fact that throughout his entire career he was called by his nickname, he said in the years he has been Lieutenant he has not heard that nickname once. He understands what happens, it is a respect aspect as well, he earned the title and the benefits. Noah now knows that it was just natural, but similarly with the Sergeants, they did not expect the change to be so drastic.

Not only do they have to deal with the stress of losing one of their coping

resources, but their responsibility within the department increases radically. They are not only responsible for their own actions and decisions, but for all of the people under them as well. As a Patrol Sergeant they are in charge of all the big decisions made on the road. As a Detective Sergeant they are in charge of all of the detectives working that shift and the specific investigative units that they are in charge of monitoring. However, they are also on call once every third weekend. As one wife pointed out, every weekend that her Detective Sergeant husband is on call he ends up going in to work. They work a lot of overtime with court and getting called in on serious cases. As a Lieutenant they are in charge of many more people in the department. The midnight and afternoon Lieutenant are in charge of the entire building including communications, patrol, and detectives because they are the highest ranking individuals in the department during those hours. The responsibility is incredible for those individuals but it also comes with many benefits, they can take lunch when they like and take off any days they wish while also getting Saturday and Sunday off.

On patrol, once an officer is finished with a report he is often done with that case. On the other hand, investigators handle several cases, about 25, in which they have to see to the end through interviews and even court proceedings. Stress from their job stems from their case load and being able to make progress on all of them for both the victims and the Sergeant that is overseeing their work. Many of the cases draw media attention and political attention, the administration may want them solved and finished quickly.

Detectives encounter the court system more often than a young patrol officer. Investigator Zachary says “So that's frustrating and that puts some stress on me because when you know the person is really guilty and just because of some new law. Its thrown

out.” He is talking about when he does all this work for a case and there may be a minor paperwork error or a more liberal law, such as the Good-Samaritan law, that relieves the suspect from any jail time. For this investigator, the criminal justice system, external to the department, is a source of stress that makes him question what he does as an investigator.

### *Family and the Police Role*

More work and responsibility in the department often results in sacrificing free time for the good of the department and their future. Taking on a role for the Special Services Team means dedicating 2 extra days of month to the department, not including actual “call-outs” when the team needs to respond to a scene. This is not the only way the department shapes the amount of time spent with family. Steven, the thirty-three year old patrol officer, said that essentially he could not take extensive time off from the time he was being canvassed for the position until his probation ends after a year and a half in the department. This can be difficult if the family wants to take a vacation, the officer may not be able to get the time off. As a person with low seniority in the department, newer officers may not have much of a choice when it comes to shift and days off. Penelope is the fiancé of Steven, an officer with a short amount of time in the department. Penelope says her one gripe with Steven is that he will not even attempt to take time off, “He won't do it just because he's new.” Steven's schedule forced him to miss an award ceremony in which Penelope was receiving an award for her contribution to her field. She does say that his a minor gripe though as he is around during the week on his days off. Many newer officers are sent to afternoons with Wednesday and Thursday off, a difficult schedule to work if the officer has older children.

### *Officers and Their Children*

It seems that this afternoon shift worked for many of the officers who had younger children at home. Some of these officers had no choice but to work this shift at their position but it allows them to be flexible with childcare. Thomas, Sean, and Oliver all work the afternoon shift and have young children at home. When asked about their day from beginning to end it always started with getting up early in the morning, before 8 am even though they do not get out until 10 or 11 pm the night before. Thomas and Sean see their wives before the females go off to their own jobs with normal working hours. Sometimes this is the only time the couples may see or talk to each other face to face until the husband gets home at night. After the wife leaves for work, Thomas immediately works on getting his youngest child up and gets the bottle ready for breakfast. Once he finishes feeding her he'll get his oldest child up and ready for the day. Thomas also takes care of the family dog, vacuuming, and dishes while his wife is at work. Mornings for Thomas are a juggling act to get both kids ready for the day and to take care of the daily chores. This shift allows for Thomas to spend quality time with the kids and take care of some of the housework, something that many men do not contribute to the household. Before Thomas and Sean leave for work the children's grandparents come over to watch them until their wives get home. Both of these families are not paying any money for childcare which is almost unheard of with children and two parents who work.

The afternoon shift does not work for everyone with families especially if the children are older. Investigator Carter has three children that are all in third grade or above and each of them takes part in after-school activities. Throughout Carter's career in

this department he has worked either midnights or days so that he could drive his children to practice and have dinner with them each night. Carter has had to change shifts because a more senior officer wanted to take a position on the day shift. The only other option for Carter would be to go back to patrol on midnights, but Carter genuinely loves his job, you can see it in the way he talks about his work. For him, he knows what he does makes a difference every day and he cares for the victims, unfortunately there are some who don't view the job this way. Carter has elected to stay in his investigator position on the afternoon shift and was asked if he will still be able to see some of his children's sports activities, Carter replied:

That's the most stressful part of my job. You want to know what stresses me out, missing my kids. And this shift is going to kill me. Literally going to eat me alive. Finding a balance between work and home can be stressful for both the officer and their family. The rough scheduling of police work is inherent, the department needs to be staffed 24 hours a day every single day of the year. Luckily, investigators only work days and afternoons but as in Carter's case it still may not work out for the family.

### *Finding a Balance*

Carter's wife understands that this a job he loves and continues to support him through this transition. However, it can be frustrating for a significant other to relate to the job and understand all that comes with being a police officer. At the police academy there is a short session available for families to warn them and offer advice about what to expect and how to deal with certain conflicts. But even veteran officers have trouble balancing work and home life. Investigator Thomas admits that:

One of the things I've learned in this job is family comes first. I lived this job for

about 4-5 years, never told this place no. They called they needed something, yup, yup, pushed my family aside, pushed my wife, my family, my friends. Work came first for about 5 years and that wound up biting me in the ass.

The new officer always wants to show the department he is dedicated and he'll want to take any overtime that is offered and so on. But Thomas, a field training officer, tells new officers that they need to find a balance between work and home, it is okay to decline an extra detail. Some officers are still struggling to find that balance between accomplishing career goals and meeting the needs of the family. Sergeant Oliver is a man that has taken on several positions in the department and currently holds a prestigious, tough, and rewarding rank. Oliver states:

Demands on time has caused stressors in our relationship. Her job is different, she goes to work and comes home, doesn't have emergency phone calls. She might bring home work to correct or plan for upcoming classes. I have outside responsibilities, court, SWAT, meetings. Those extra things she doesn't have in her job, she doesn't like that so much.

Oliver is a determined individual who has worked very hard in the department to get to this rank and he has hope that he can advance his rank in the future. He is a smart man that knows he must contribute a lot to the department to earn respect from his peers and the administration. Everyone around him recognizes he is a hard worker, Oliver jokes that his detectives often ask him if he lives in the police station. However, it is hard to burn the candle at both ends, to be committed both as a husband and father but also a high ranking officer in the department. Finding a middle ground is difficult and is a point that this family struggles with at this time. Oliver remarked that during the week, he communicates with his wife via a notepad left on the kitchen table because they are both extremely busy with their careers and their children.

Oliver's situation is similar to the one discussed by Jackson and Thomas, there are



people in both ears that expect certain things out of you. On top of this, all of these individuals said they expected a lot out of themselves, they put more pressure on themselves than others put on them. They know that they have to get through their cases but also get home to have dinner with the wife and children.

Higher rank and more seniority in the department have advantages when trying to work around schedules with the family. Lieutenant Noah has 29 years in the department and his rank allows him the flexibility to have dinner with his wife at his convenience. Noah also has weekends off so on the weekends him and his wife often travel and go to festivals. As seen by other officers that were interviewed, having the same days off as the significant other is a bonus not often seen by these officers for many years. Having seniority in the department is beneficial when officers are bidding for their shifts every year. Each year they go down the seniority list and they choose which shift they would like to work and what days off they want. Of course this varies by rank, but in most cases if you have 10 years of seniority as a patrol officer you can choose any shift you want.

The shift or days off that an officer has is not the only way in which the career impacts the family. In the academy the recruits are taught to control the public within a scene and maintain power over the individuals. This type of thinking can leak into the personal lives of the officers. Jackson admitted that sometimes this happens in his relationship with his wife:

It's hard to go from officer to husband. Sometimes you don't ever shut that button off. And she always says, when we get in arguments, her thing is "I'm sorry officer I didn't know I was wrong." Sometimes it's hard to turn it off. She tries her best to point it out. If anything, if we ever, we rarely disagree and we rarely fight, but if we do sometimes it's natural to just get in that kinda mode. Where we're never wrong as a police officer, we're always right. Sometimes you get in that

mode and you don't even realize it, that really job she makes will actually straighten you back out.

This “cop mode” comes natural to Jackson, he uses it 40 hours a week to stay alive on the street. The literature suggests that officers learn to control their emotions in order to handle tough situations on the street. Relating to Hochsfield 's (1975) work, managing emotion is a part of their job, officer Jackson and several other officers talked about their work and their calls as facts and situations. Emotion is taken out of the equation for most of the problems they face, officers are called to the scene to make decisions and find solutions. Thinking in this way may have led to many domestic violence issues among officers that have been in the news in recent years. Investigator Thomas even said “Domestics is what gets cops in trouble, more than alcohol.” The causes of these domestics remains tough to study as the parties involved may not want to come forward. The statement by Thomas is the only time domestic violence between officers and their significant others was brought up in an interview. One reason this could be is that it is a personal issue and even if they knew of domestic problems of another officer in the department, the officer would be wary to admit it.

A relationship point that was discussed is when the officer creates an emotional distance between themselves and a loved one. For all of the men who admitted to this it occurred as a result of something that happened at work. Paul worked afternoons for 4 years before switching to midnights, he described a typical night for him after his 3-11 shift:

I just need to relax. And a big thing is I just want to unwind. My fiancé always says I don't talk much when I get home, because I just want to relax for a minute. But if it's a slow night ill talk after work and it's fine. But on those busy days you just want to decompress. A half hour is mine, just let me think.

More often than not the afternoon shift has a busy day, and on these days Paul just needed a half hour of alone time when he got home.

Investigator Thomas, who also works afternoons, admitted that he has created an emotional distance between him and his wife and it has gotten worse since he started his career as a police officer. Thomas said:

I think we're on a down spiral right now. Because we're both stressed out between jobs and the kids and the living arrangements and all that. We both have short fuses... We wake up in the morning and we're mentally and physically exhausted in the morning. How the fuck do you start your day like that. Two kids crying, a dog biting at your ankles wanting to play.

Here it is a combination of work and home that has created this tense household. Both parents work and there are days when Thomas' wife can tell how his mood is the minute he walks through the door. As stated earlier, Thomas wakes up and takes care of the kids, goes to work and deals with call after call, by the time he gets home he has to be exhausted, it is inevitable. Being so busy with work and the kids this couple does not have time to work on their own relationship.

This problem can be compared to the lives of low-income families as well. If two parents are working multiple jobs to support their children and pay for their home, they may not have alone time or free days. Childcare is an issue for these families as well, if they cannot afford to pay for a responsible person to watch their children they could have the same balancing act seen by the officers who work this afternoon shift. Taking care of the children while the spouse is at work and then when they come home you both switch roles. It can be an exhausting cycle experienced by any family in America until both children are of school age.

The 3pm-11pm shift is not the only shift that causes problems in communicating with the significant other. Juan, a Sergeant for the midnight shift, often sacrifices sleep in exchange for seeing his wife and taking care of his children. Juan's wife, Amelia, works four days a week and takes care of the children before they go to sleep at night. Luckily, these two get to spend time together after Amelia gets home from work and before Juan needs to leave. During this time they get to talk about the kids and their day, but often they are not alone as they do have two little ones in the house. Amelia makes dinner for the family most nights. When Amelia was asked if Juan does any of the housework while he is home she said it was split "60/40" but she goes on to describe that she cooks and does all the cleaning. They both said that they split the childcare evenly and Amelia said that Juan does help clean up the house when they are having company over. Amelia's thinking is very similar to some of the women in "The Second Shift" by Hochschild and Machung (1989) when describing the division of household labor. Here, Amelia takes on a lot of the daily tasks required in the home while Juan takes care of the dogs and the outside work.

Juan and Amelia talk openly about Juan's work and he shares limited information about his shifts. Amelia said:

He'll bounce things off of me that he's like if he's struggling to make a decision on something or if he has to. He does tend to be a shyer person so if he has to, he's not very confrontational so if he has to do something like confrontational in nature he bounces off me.

Juan said he often thinks about things in his head over and over and that once he talks about it with his wife or another Sergeant it makes him feel better. He uses that as an outlet when he has to discipline someone at work or make a decision that impacts other

people. Amelia is very understanding and likes that he has taken on this role as a Sergeant, she says it is a good fit for him.

Juan is similar to the other officers in that he will not share information with her about some of the really bad things they experience on a somewhat regular basis. They are thinking that their significant others do not need to be exposed to all of the negative things that they deal with at work. Investigator Carter said:

Well, if I have a bad day I'll tell her I had a bad day and then she'll know. But I don't tell her specifically what I'm looking at; an 8 year old boy being raped and drowned in a toilet, they don't need to hear that.

If Investigator Carter shared only these stories with his wife he would expose her to a world that she may not be prepared for or would never want to see. Officers may be criticized for asking for thirty minutes of alone time to gather their thoughts or for not sharing information about their day, but hearing an explanation like this one puts it into perspective for those that do not understand the job. In many cases that is how these officers deal with what they see and they don't want to share that with their significant other.

Penelope is the fiancé of Steven and they both said that Steven would spare some of the details about his day. Penelope recalled that “He's said before like oh my god you wouldn't believe some of the stuff you see and he leaves it at that because I don't want to hear that.” There are things that happen during a shift that would cause some individuals to lose faith in mankind. Specific calls that occur during a shift can change how an officer interacts with their significant other at home.

Lieutenant Noah confessed that he creates an emotional distance between him and

his wife after certain instances. Have you ever wondered who notifies a family that their loved one has died in an accident? Lieutenant Noah's wife knew that he sometimes had to go to the scene of fatal accidents, but he said “it never dawned on her who tells the family. And then it dawned on her and then I told her and it was a whole different thing.” Lieutenant Noah said that when he first started policing there was never any formal training on how to inform families that their son or wife had died in an accident. The Lieutenant said that after waking a family up at 1 o'clock in the morning and informing them that they lost a loved one he would go home and have to sort through it himself. He said:

So sometimes that disconnect happened then, I would be out til 6 or 7 in the morning, finally coming home and somewhere around 3 I had told someone they had lost their 17 year old son or their husband or something like that. And there would be a little disconnect there for my wife and I. (Noah)

Noah knew that those specific critical incidents impacted him as a person and as a husband, but after a little time he would sit down and talk about it, then he would feel better.

Informing someone of bad news is something that happens in the medical community everyday. It is difficult because someone has to inform the family of this sad news in both police work and in hospitals and they cannot delegate the task to a patient care technician or a patrolman. Practice eventually allows for Doctors to get better at informing the families and being sensitive, but it still does not make for an easy task. In the Lieutenant's case he started to educate himself, he read books and attended classes on the best practices of police officers informing families of these tragedies. Once he became knowledgeable about the subject he started teaching it in the police academy. His

initiative to teach himself how to make the fatality notification easier on the family and himself has given other people in similar positions the opportunity to learn the best way to approach this tough duty.

### *Critical Incidents*

The department defines a critical incident as anything involving:

A line of duty death, serious line of duty injury, member in service suicide, disasters or incidents which resulted in mass casualties, unusually tragic deaths to children, significant events where the victims are relatives or friends of members, events that seriously threaten the lives of members, and any event that has significant emotional power to overwhelm the member.<sup>1</sup>

Informing a family that they have just lost a loved one is only one stressor that is found in the policing world. Several of the officers interviewed have been involved in or responded to the aftermath of critical incidents in their career. Lieutenant Noah was working one night in a heavy rainstorm when two officers were dispatched to a local middle school. When the officers got there they found a 15 year old boy stuck in the pipe of a culvert ditch with his friend frantically standing to the side unable to help. The ditch was filled with rain while massive amounts of water was being sucked into the pipe, the force was so heavy that the boy could not get out. Lieutenant Noah recalls:

One [Officer] tried to tie ropes to himself to get into the water, they just couldn't save the kid. And within 15 minutes, the water was gone, but the kid was stuffed into a culvert pipe dead.. these two officers were trying in vain to save the kids life.

This incident was difficult for the officers to handle for several reasons, it was a younger person and they tried very hard to save his life but they failed.

After incidents like these the department brought in a critical incident support

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<sup>1</sup>Information used here was listed in the department's Officers manual as of 2013.

team from another department to have a debriefing about the incident. Any members who were involved in the incident are invited, anyone from the police dispatchers, to the EMS personnel, and the officers that responded to the scene. Anyone that would like to speak is given a chance to talk about what they saw and what they did at the scene. This team coincides with research that suggests that the best way for officers to deal with these incidents is to talk through the scenario with other people involved (Paton 2005). This police department did not have a critical incident team until a major event occurred a few years ago.

Juan was involved in a critical incident in his career. At this point the department did not have a critical incident support team themselves so they again brought in a team from another department. Juan said “everything happened so quick that even right after it happened I was looking at the scene and I was like when did his car hit mine and when did this person get there.” In this case the debriefing was good for Juan because the other officer that was on scene was able to fill in some of the gaps in his memory. Putting together all of the pieces helped Juan make sense of the whole incident. Juan then remarked about his personal response after the incident, “part of thinking about it nonstop is just trying to remember what happened.” As discussed in the literature review, officers experience highest stress levels within three days of the critical incident (Violanti 1996). This idea applies to Juan's situation as he continued to think about what happened, had difficulty sleeping, and people were constantly trying to contact him in the few days after the occurrence. After this incident, the department put together their own Critical Incident Peer Support team.

Juan admitted that the way he interacted at home with his wife and child changed



for about six months after the incident. The officer states:

I was a little more hyper-vigilant at home...Every time I heard a car outside I'd go look, whereas before I never used to. And it has subsided now, but every time I heard a car door shut I would look outside because I was thinking oh this guy's friends are going to come here. It's not hard to find out where cops live, you Google your name and you can find it. (Juan).

Juan has talked through his fears with his wife and professionals who are trained to deal with these situations. Paranoia is one of the most common characteristics police families used to describe their officer in the home and Juan displayed this behavior after the critical incident (Beehr, Johnson, and Nieva 1995). Juan says that this incident has changed how he looks at people today. One positive aspect that resulted from this incident is that Juan says it has made him a safer cop because he expects the worst now when he encounters someone or an unknown situation.

Another frustrating aspect that Juan had to deal with was the media, even though everyone told him not to read the papers or watch the news, it can be difficult to resist. The local media reported incorrect stories and facts about the events that occurred that day. Luckily for Juan none of the reports were negative against him and oftentimes he was praised for his actions. In that case, it was not much of a stressor for him because he did not have to worry about these reports.

Zachary has been an investigator for many years in the department. This investigator actually faced a situation in which his own life was in danger. Luckily, his partner saved his life that day. He suffered minor injuries but he was back to work the next day. However, this critical incident in which Investigator Zachary's life was put in direct danger had less of an impact on him than investigating and responding to infant or child deaths. It has been reported that dealing with the death of children can be an

emotional experience for police officers and thus lead to stress. Zachary admitted:

I have experienced probably 5 infant/ child deaths. A couple of them were SIDS [Sudden Infant Death Syndrome] and I had to try to revive the one child. It didn't work. That upset me for a couple of days.

Similarly to the officers that tried to save the 15 year old boy, Investigator Zachary tried saving a child's life but was unsuccessful. However, individuals experience and deal with these situations in different ways. Lieutenant Noah experienced a similar situation in which, "I've had to CPR on infants that didn't live and stuff like that. But most of that stuff I close the door in the parking lot and it stays in here." Lieutenant Noah and many other officers say that they attempt to keep work and home separate by leaving these troubling situations at work. Sometimes this can be an impossible task as some instances that occur on the job call for help from others to sort through what happened.

Responding to unknown situations has been said to increase officer's stress levels more than if they understood what they were walking into. Officer Jackson experienced a critical incident in which this type of situation occurred. The call came out over the radio 40 minutes before the end of Jackson's 16 hour long work day. Civilians had been hurt and the updates on the call continued to get worse until they arrived on scene. When this officer and a coworker arrived at the scene they witnessed one of their other officer's in a compromised position in which the officer could have been severely hurt. The lack of information about the event combined with the fellow officer almost being injured could create enormous stress for Jackson. Violanti and Aron (1995) found that scenes in which other officers were injured caused increased stress for an officer.

Unlike Juan, Jackson did not read the newspapers or listen to any reports about the incident. Jackson said:

It's one of those things you try to block out. I didn't read the paper or the internet about it. I kinda just let it go because I know when you read it what the general public is thinking as opposed to I know what actually happened. I was there I witnessed it.

After a quick search of the internet for this incident, Jackson seems to be right. Twitter messages and blog posts often blame the officers involved in this incident and leave out crucial information. Negative stories that get out in the media lead to the less than favorable views that many citizens have about police officers. Jackson was lucky to be around supportive people after this incident. His wife was very understanding as well as members of his family as several of them also have law enforcement experience. This situation supports literature by Violanti (1996) stating that spouses serve as supporters in times of need for officers.

The stress for Jackson that stemmed from this incident was not entirely from the actual incident itself but what surrounds the aftermath. After the incident that followed the 16 hour shift he was only able to grab two hours of sleep before mandatory meetings with the department and the town attorney. He had some time off after that day and slept a lot for the three days after, not because it was mentally or emotionally difficult but because he was just physically exhausted.

Even though these critical incidents took a big toll on many of these officers there is still a debate as to whether these critical incidents have more of an impact on their lives in the long term compared to daily stressors.

### *Daily Stressors*

Daily stressors could be anything from traffic stops, domestic incidents, the shift the officer works, and the administration.

### *Working Midnights*

Steven was the first officer interviewed and said that sleep revolves around everything when an officer works the midnight shift. Juan states that:

I think the daily things have a bigger impact just because I don't think about the [critical incident] everyday but I think everyday how I'm tired and I have to go home and sleep and I have court at 10 o'clock so I'm only going to get 2 hours of sleep today. The daily things about work I think have a bigger impact but those even though they're shorter they're more powerful.

Juan has been working the midnight shift for almost two years and it is something he has to worry about every day after work. Most of the officers interviewed that currently work midnights said that they usually only get 5-7 hours of sleep each day and it often depends on the season. In saying that, if they do have a bad day at work they know they are going home and going to sleep, sometimes when they wake up they feel better and are more open to discussing what happened the night before.

In terms of police officer health this sleep schedule is not ideal as it screws up the circadian rhythm. Paul shares information on his sleeping pattern:

The summer I was getting 4 hours a night. I was waking up probably 12 o'clock or 1 o'clock every single day. You get yourself a coffee at night. And I can't take naps. I can't do it. And that was a big big thing. And that's another reason why a-line [10p-6a] sucks, is sleep.

Think about this, many of these police officers working the midnight shift are responding to calls that can be very dangerous in nature and they are driving around in vehicles often operating on 4 hours of sleep. As stated in the literature review, lack of sleep can have serious consequences on the body and cause delays when officers attempt to react quickly to situations (Kerley 2005). There is a trade-off to this sleep schedule in terms of family life.

Jackson and Juan are able to attend more family gatherings because most of them take place during the afternoon shift. If something is scheduled for earlier in the day though they are sacrificing sleep in order to attend. Juan also says he sacrifices sleep in order to spend more time with his children and wife. When asked if he ever takes naps before he goes in for his shift at 11 pm he replied, “But its also the only alone time I guess you'd say with my wife so its hard for me to just say I'm going in the bedroom to sleep because its the only time I'm going to see her” (Juan). A benefit to this shift is that Juan and Paul are able to have dinner at the normal hour with their significant others.

Jackson spoke briefly about the importance of eating a healthy meal before heading into work for his midnight shift. Unlike Juan, Jackson actually prepares a meal for himself and his wife when she is home. Jackson states:

I find that a lot of the guys if they don't eat properly what they end up doing is buying a bunch of candy and junk food. Is it going to make you full? Yea, probably. But it's terrible for you. It's why you gotta look at all the guys that are out of shape.

This officer said that many of his coworkers stop at a gas station before their shift to meet up and get coffee, but many of them buy candy and Doritos to snack on while they are in the car. These officers are sedentary in the car for most of the night and thus combine eating unhealthy food and long hours of inactivity.

Interestingly, Paul said he eats considerably less on midnights than when he did on the afternoon shift. When he first started the shift he was only eating one meal at 6 pm and then snacking in the car before eating a light meal at lunch. Paul discussed the combination of not sleeping and not eating while working this shift “It's a recipe for disaster. It's not normal.” Previous sections show the importance of officers being

prepared and ready to react to any situation they are presented with but this compilation of factors can be costly.

Coming together over a meal is one thing that the midnight officers use to bond during their shift as many of them stop and eat their lunch at a 24 hour diner because it is the only restaurant open in the middle of the night. Several of these officers admitted that eating unhealthy diner food at 3am is probably a poor choice but it can be very tempting. In comparison to other shifts, they cannot go home for dinner as many are afraid of waking up their significant other. Options are limited and Sergeant Juan said that bringing a lunch would be better, but he just doesn't do that. The diner also serves as a social place for these officers as well, they get to interact with other officers and bounce ideas off each other. The lower call volume on midnights also allows them to meet up and talk about what they did on a call and what the other officer would recommend doing when that situation occurs again.

Personal consequences of this shift are not the only points addressed by these officers. The veteran officer Paul notes several issues about working the midnight shift:

You go to these hotels, you don't know what you're walking into, you go to these houses where we've had 20-30 calls there within the last year, you don't know what you're getting into and with a-line especially. There's 6 guys working for the whole [jurisdiction]. It's scary. If 2 guys are on lunch, you're going to these alarms too by yourself in the pitch black way on the outskirts of town all by yourself, 10 minutes away from anybody at minimum. I mean it's just you.

Some of these instances are unique to this shift, there are fewer officers working, so if you have a call on one side of the area, your backup may be minutes away in situations where seconds matter. Facing a domestic problem or a fight alone could result in the officer being injured before backup arrives. Paul admits that these scenarios play through

in his mind before he gets to the scene. In that case he may already be invoking the fight or flight response described in the stress literature. However, these types of dangerous calls were actually one of the positive aspects of this shift that the officers mentioned, they enjoyed the challenging calls. Each individual handles the inherent stressful aspects of the job differently.

Officer Steven talked about some of the differences on calls between afternoons and midnights:

Calls on midnights, it's real. On afternoons you get a lot of junk calls. "Somebody told me on Facebook that I'm stupid." But if you get a domestic call at 3 in the morning, they're fighting. On midnights there's not 3,000 cars on the road. People out at 3am are different than those out at 5 in the afternoon. You get a lot more quality stuff.

The types of calls that these officers respond to on midnights was the number one reason that those interviewed chose to move to midnights or the reason they stayed for several years. Penelope said she tries not to think about the dangers involved in some of those calls on midnights but she realizes officer Steven enjoys those calls as they force him to think and react, as opposed to constantly dealing with traffic accidents.

### *The Afternoon Shift*

One of the reasons officer Paul transferred from the afternoon shift which is 3pm-11pm, to midnights is the call volume encountered. According to the department's annual report from 2012 the afternoon shift responded to twice the amount of calls they received for the midnight shift<sup>2</sup>. Paul explains the reason for his move to midnights:

I just had enough of c-line[afternoons]. It burns you out. You go to call to call to call on I'd say 75% of the days. You're always at minimum guys on the road,

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<sup>2</sup> Information regarding demographics from the department are from the department's Annual Report from 2013.

especially in the summer. I could have been more senior on afternoons, I'm one of the lower guys on midnights but it was burning me out, completely burning me out. Its like you don't even want to go to work. You get held over too, you get those late calls when you're there till 1 in the morning.

The benefits of seniority on a shift were detailed earlier in this chapter but even recognizing those advantages Paul decided that it was enough on afternoons. Burnout was talked about incessantly in the literature on police officer stress but this was the only time any interviewees mentioned the feeling of “burnout.” Many of the officers that worked patrol on afternoons commented on taking call after call without much of a break. Oftentimes their lunch is pushed back later into the shift or they skip it all together. Being on patrol during this shift can create difficulty in scheduling a lunch with either other officers or their families. Amelia was asked if her husband came home to have dinner on his lunch and she replied: “I would frequently cook and have it go cold because he would be tied up.” She said that this happened more frequently than him being home for dinner at the time they had planned.

The Investigators that worked this shift often made it a point to go home almost every night and have dinner with their wife and kids. Each Investigator that was married said they tried to go home for dinner 4 out of the 5 working days per week. Here their schedule is often more flexible and allows for them to take lunch when they are comfortable and not be interrupted by an abundance of calls. That is just another benefit of having rank in the department, they are able to see their families on their break. If a patrol officer was unable to stop at home for their break they may not see their wife at all that day.

One sergeant interviewed said that since he and his wife work opposite shifts, they



often communicate via “a notepad left on the kitchen table.” His wife was interviewed as well and she reiterated this point stating that sometimes that is the only communication they have during the week and they try to make up for it on the weekends. This can create an issue in the relationship if they hardly get to spend any time with each other most days out of the week. The schedule is something that these two have little control over for now and they try to make the best out of the time they spend together.

Balancing home life is difficult for the officers that work this shift but one benefit was seen across the board for all officers that had small children. Thomas, Sean, and Oliver all have children that are still in diapers, and all three of them pay zero dollars for childcare. As stated earlier in the chapter, their mornings revolve around their children. Lorelai is the wife of Oliver and she states that his shift allows him to spend more time with their children than any other shift would at this point in time. She did admit that the afternoon shift would force him to miss out on sports games once the children starts getting older, a fate that Investigator Carter will be experiencing this year. These examples show that what is viewed as a benefit now that the children are young will soon become a major problem with balancing home and work in the future. That point of contention can bring out stress in an officer.

One of the most important things that officers like about the afternoon shift is the fact that it occurs during their normal waking hours. Steven described it as a shift that “doesn't dictate your life,” you can get up when you want and go out after work. Investigator Thomas admitted that he enjoyed the late nights before he was married and had children. Several officers admitted that this shift can be a lot of fun both during work hours and after for the patrol officers.

Officer Paul called the afternoon shift the “party shift” because officers were constantly going out to have drinks at the bar, sometimes until three o'clock in the morning. Most of the officers that work the afternoon shift work on Wednesday's because that is court night for the department. On nights like that there could be 18 patrol officers working and many of them go out to drink when the shift ends. The officers that worked this shift said that they drank the most, and that is partly because those who worked midnights found it difficult to go home and have a beer at 7 in the morning after a long shift.

Part of going out to the bar after the shift is because, unlike the officers that work midnights, they are alone on calls for the 8 hours and cannot meet up to chat with other officers. The bar serves as a place for what they call “choir practice,” where “you bitch about the bosses, about this, the idiots you talk to in the street that are just complete a-holes to ya but then again you talk about your funny calls” (Paul). This could be considered one coping strategy they use to vent their frustration and stress from the administration, the public, and their Sergeant. The bar serves as a place where they can relax, away from the pressures of home and work to just chat with the boys about things they have going on in their lives. This finding reinforces the literature stating that alcohol surrounds this type of discussion after work (Beehr et al., 1995). “Choir practice” for the afternoon shift involves many younger officers that are mostly on patrol which supports the research from Burke (1993). For these officers going to the bar after work is about sharing ideas, getting things off their chest, and relying on one another to sort through problems.

This bond that the officers have and their sharing begins in the academy and

continues throughout their career. Lieutenant Noah said he still reaches out to someone he went to the academy with when he needs to bounce something off of him. Investigator Zachary said he had a “work wife” which was his partner and they would share almost every intimate detail about their lives together. This bonding, whether it occurs in the bar or in the patrol car, serves several purposes. They are around people who understand the troubles they face and someone who will not judge them or reprimand them. They can speak openly and often the other officer will have advice about what to do in their situation. This cohesiveness is helpful when the officer is still learning the road and continues as the pressure and rank on the individual builds over their career. Drinking at the bar is just one way they are able to use this resource. Interactions during “choir practice” build solidarity within the group of officers that attend the after-hours festivities. Social interaction among co-workers outside of work surrounds bars and other drinking venues (Martin, Roman, and Bluma 1996). “Choir practice” in the current study supports this claim made in previous research.

“Choir practice” may have a negative influence in the efforts of the Critical Incident Peer Support team in the department. Several of the officers mentioned that there still may be stigma in the department attached to reaching out for their services. One was afraid that if he went to one of the meetings something he said in there would be repeated either in the locker room or during “choir practice” at the bar. Fears of the department or other officers finding out about their issues dealing with stress may have led or will lead to officers not reaching out for help. Officers often compared the department to a high school with the gossiping that goes on during and after hours. Occasions like “choir practice” at the bar are opportunities for people to drink and loosen up and some officers

are worried that their personal information would be spread to the rest of the department in this arena. In this case, talking with other officers can be helpful, but the high school mentality may lead to under-utilization of stress management resources that could help an individual and their family cope with stress from the job.

Many officers decide not to go to the bar every night or at all because then they are sacrificing time with their family. Instead, officer Paul would go home after a 3-11 shift and have “two gin and tonics every time I came home from work.” For Paul this cocktail was made during his thirty minute alone time he needed to decompress after a busy shift each night. Investigator Sean says he isn't much of a drinker, but when he needs to decompress after a hectic shift: “I like watching sitcoms, that's like my thing, now I like “Modern Family”, or the “Middle”. I like those, that's like my night of TV, Wednesday.” He goes home and watches comedy shows on the couch with his wife instead of going out to the bars. A handful of the officers said that was a better option because going to the bar with a bunch of officers has often led to trouble. Many of them say they've heard stories and it just isn't worth it. Investigators Zachary and Thomas have one glass of red wine a night before they go to bed.

None of the officers said they really had a drinking problem, though a few admitted to drinking more while working the afternoon shift. They did mention that there were a few people in the department with drinking problems, but they remarked that it had more to do with the individual than the job itself. Most of the healthy coping mechanisms associated with this shift surround talking to other officers and exercising.

When Investigator Thomas has a rough day he sits in his office, listens to music,

and often a couple of other Investigators working the shift go down and they chat for about an hour. He says he feels better after that and then goes home. Some just go to bed when they get home because a late arrest shook them up a bit. Investigator Sean says he will watch his TV shows at night and he'll either run then or in the morning while the children are still sleeping. It is not that he and the others who workout do it to relieve stress, they enjoy working out and say that the stress relief is an unintended byproduct. Officer Jackson is one of the few people that said he combines his workout at the gym with yoga, and he thinks that many officers would benefit from bringing yoga into their lives.

### *Analyzing the Data*

Stressors experienced by these officers vary based on if they are new, what shift they work, and if they hold rank. The results show that many officers cope through discussing events with their coworkers during or after their shift, their significant other, or family members that were in law enforcement.

This study shows that the family can be both a source of stress for an individual and a way for them to relieve stress from their job. Several officers used their significant other as a way to bounce ideas off them if they had no one else to talk to for help. This situation occurred with the Sergeants and Lieutenant more than the patrol officers. A reason for this is their prior discussion of a changed role in the department. They are no longer just patrol officers, they have increased responsibility, are connected more to the administration, and have the ability to discipline an officer. These combined factors make it necessary for the ranked officer to talk to someone other than those in their department.

This may happen if it isn't appropriate to discuss such things with one officer about their fellow officer. As an individual with rank, their interactions in the department change which force them to rely on coping sources external to the organization such as their spouse.

Family seemed to be a significant source of stress for officers that have children because they are forced to balance their work and family lives. The officers with younger children often get up early in the morning therefore not getting as much sleep as they should. They watch their children until they go into work and since the afternoon shift is so busy they handle an abundance of calls. They are exhausted when they go into work because they have to watch their children and may not sleep as well and when they get into work they often do not get a break. These officers deal with problem after problem and it can be a hectic shift that deals with a wide variety of calls. When they get home at night it may feel like they worked two shifts. The same could be said for the wives as well, because on top of work and taking care of the children, the wives of these officers are taking care of the daily and routine housework.

As noted earlier, Hochschild (1975) suggests women often work two shifts, one making a wage and the other at home watching children and performing daily cleaning tasks. The case could be made that the significant others in this study faced this second shift in the sense that most of the time they were the ones cooking dinner, cleaning the bathroom, and dusting the house. Each of the significant others contributed at least 50% of the childcare tasks between them and the officer.

When officers work the afternoon shift it is almost as if each of the parents takes

on the role of a single parent during the week. By this I mean that there is usually only one half of the couple home at one time, they take care of all of the children, the cooking, and cleaning up that is necessary for that time. When the officers and their significant others had a day off together they would share these tasks, split up the childcare and attempt to do things outside of the house. However, during the week it was a different story, each adult had to run the household themselves because the other is working.

This type of schedule could be exhausting and the officers admitted that they have seen officers coming into work looking like they did not sleep at all because of things they had going on at home. Not sleeping combined with the tasks of being a police officer can turn out to be a dangerous combination.

Sleep was a central idea discussed among each officer that worked the midnight shift during the time of the study or at any point in their career. In the literature review it was noted that a study found that having no sleep over a 24 hour time period is the same as having a blood alcohol level of .10 (Kerley 2005). Several of the officers discussed periods in their career where they got about four hours of sleep when working the midnight shift. A few of the officers stated a couple of times when they have had to work overtime and therefore work 16 hours straight often meaning that would reach that 24 hour time frame with no sleep.

This lack of sleep combined with the inherent type of work that the midnight shift brings can lead to more stress for the officer. The midnight patrol officers spoke of meeting up with guys when it is slow on midnights because it can be boring riding around in a car with no human contact for 8 hours. During this time and at the diner on their

break they discuss some calls they had been thinking about, the administration, or family issues. Talking with other officers is a way they use to cope with what they deal with on the job or at home. This can be beneficial because they may share advice with each other on how to handle some situations at work or just talk through things that are going on in their personal lives.

In contrast to this, all of the midnight officers discussed the fact that the types of calls on midnights are different and that they can be more dangerous because of the people out at that time. This shift has fewer officers working than afternoons or days and so the number of people on a dangerous call may be fewer and it may be minutes from the time the first officer arrives on scene until backup gets to the scene. As seen by the description of some of the critical incidents these officers interviewed have experienced, calls can escalate in a matter of seconds. An officer in a dangerous situation alone for several minutes could make them worry about how to control the situation until they get help.

These officers deal with this stress through planning, two officers stated that on the way to these calls they run through possible scenarios in their head and decide on what they will do when they arrive on scene. The literature review noted that planning is a positive coping mechanism people use to address the different stressors in their life (Haisch and Meyers 2004). Thinking about what they will do when they get to the scene will allow them to take control of the situation and respond to the different challenges rather than going there and just thinking about how far away backup will be coming from to help.



Going to the gym and exercising is another way these officers used to relieve their stress, although none worked out with the goal of relieving stress. They would run on the treadmill if they had a rough day at work or take out their frustration on the weights at the gym the next day. They noted that even though they didn't use it to relieve stress that's what it ended up doing as a positive consequence. Once they got into their workout their mind would float to other things and to what they were doing at that moment. They didn't think about the dozens of other things they had to do or the difficult individuals they had to deal with at work the day before. They used it as an escape and it worked to both keep them healthy and to sort through what they had on their mind.

However, many officers keep things in their head for longer periods of time before they talk about what it is that is bothering them. Two of the wives said that they can tell when something is on their husband's mind and they are thinking about things from work. Even when they are home and away from the stress of work they may think about their cases or disciplinary measures they need to take in the upcoming week. During these times the wives said that their husbands seemed distracted when interacting with the children or they just walk around the house. One Sergeant said when he has a difficult administrative decision to make he often paces back and forth in his kitchen. This behavior may make it seem that the officer is detached, but really they just have things on their mind that they are choosing to think about and stew over instead of discussing them with other officers or their significant others. However, all of the officers that did this stated that they just needed some time to work through it themselves before they talked about it with another person. That is a perfectly acceptable explanation but it can be difficult for a family to accept when they know they already fight for spending time with

their officer. If they only get to spend two days together as a couple the wife may not want the husband to be somewhere else in his mind for that short time. It can be a point of contention but it seems that the longer these couples are together, the more they understand the need for space and understanding during those instances.

The officers make a conscious effort to check their work life at the door before they come home after a shift. The various stressors found in policing in this study show that it can be difficult at times to keep work out of family life. The shift they work influences how they are at home based on the sleep they get and the amount of calls they handle each shift. The rank they hold determines how often they are called in for court, overtime, and meetings with the District Attorney or other police agencies. Each rank has different stressors involved but the individual experiences these differently and has their own ways to deal with their responsibilities.

The factors that contribute to the everyday stress of these officers could be seen in any profession that has long hours and shift work. They are asked to balance and give 100% to their family and to the department. Officers need to prove themselves, show that they can perform their job and excel in order help victims and gain a higher rank someday. To do this they may accept overtime, difficult cases, more responsibility, appointment to the Special Response Team, and other duties that take away from time that could be spent at home with their family.

Officers with a significant other and children need to find ways to fit family life into their work schedule, not the other way around. Family functions are missed because of the shift they work or getting called in for overtime. They make the most of the

situation by meeting up for dinner if possible and spending time together before or after the officer goes in for their shift. It takes compassion and understanding from both the officer and the significant other. The officer needs to understand that their significant other expects help with the childcare and the dishes, not just paying for their new pool. The significant other needs to understand that the officer may want to get rank in the department for reasons that could help the family situation and to meet their own goals as an individual. Communicating these points can be key for these couples but it is a conversation that is not often had. Tension and conflict may build if there is a lack of sympathy for either side of the relationship. Working, taking care of children, and maintaining a home is a balancing act that is performed by these officers and their families along with many other people in the United States.

## Chapter 5: Discussion And Conclusion

The literature on police stress offers insight into their job and the daily tasks they face. After reading various sources it is clear that there are just as many questions as there are answers about the types of stressors within the law enforcement field. Many studies used surveys and statistics to learn about the stressful aspects of police work. One study by Roberts and Levenson (2001) interviewed and studied police officers and their significant others using daily logs, interviews, and physiological measures. The study by these authors inspired the use of significant others in this current study as they interact with their officer on a regular basis, they see what the officer does not recognize. This study contributes to the literature by interviewing both police officers and their spouses to determine what they thought was the most stressful aspect of police work, how they balance family life, and how they cope with what they see on a regular basis.

Police officers face stressors inherent in police work, from the organization, the courts, and from their personal lives. These stressors together can take a toll on the individual if they are unprepared to deal with the situations they face. The calls that the officers go on may not be stressful everyday, but dealing with the public and handling call after call can make an officer feel burnt out after eight hours. Responding to calls on midnights when backup is minutes away can increase stress levels in an individual knowing that they will have to control a dangerous situation before another officer arrives on scene.

Dealing with these stressors becomes more difficult with lack of sleep or improper eating stemming from their personal choices and their shift. Working midnights allows officers to spend more time with their families but comes with a trade-off as they may get

fewer than six hours of sleep each night. Here, they may go into work exhausted and then have to deal with other people's problems all night or respond to calls that put themselves or other officers in direct danger. Working the afternoon shift is beneficial to officers who have small children because they can stay home with the youngsters while their wife is working which allows for special one on one time. In this situation though, they get up early to take care of the kids and go into work to handle a fury of calls. At the end of the day the officer and their significant other may feel like they both worked a double shift.

Officers may feel stress when their hopes and aspirations of moving up in rank in the department conflicts with time they are able to spend with their family. Overtime and extra details and effort by the officer at work takes away from time spent with their significant other or children. However, once the officer has a higher rank they may be able to get more time off to spend with their family or pick a shift that works out in the best interest of their home life. If they have children in high school the officer may choose to work the day shift so that they can watch sports events or attend activities in the afternoon but working the afternoon shift may benefit an officer who has small children.

People in professions with long hours and shift work face similar difficulties in their everyday lives. They want to get to do well at work and get a promotion because that is their goal and they may think it is best for their family. Working these long hours takes away time they can spend with their family so they may be sacrificing in the short term in order to achieve their long term goals. Nurses, doctors, waitresses at diners that are open 24 hours a day, gas station attendants, and truckers may put in long hours at non-conventional working hours. Working what may be considered a normal day shift

such as 9am- 5pm, may be difficult to achieve in these types of jobs with a lack of seniority.

People in those professions may face the same difficulties seen by the police officers in this study based on the hours they work. “Choir practice” was best explained by Wambaugh (1975):

It was merely an off-duty meeting...for policemen, who, having just finished their tour of duty, were too tense or stimulated or electrified to go to a silent sleeping house and lie down like ordinary people while nerve ends sparked (20).

The officers going out for “choir practice” work the afternoon shift. Many of the officers interviewed for this study stated that their significant other was asleep when they got home after a shift. Therefore, similar to the statement by Wambaugh (1975), they choose to go out with their coworkers to discuss a variety of topics relevant to the officers. Getting together for “choir practice” after work gives them a sense of solidarity, these officers vary in ages and seniority but they come together at the end of a shift. They each talk about the different problems they might be having on the job or at home. Support from coworkers helps condition stress felt by an individual through talking about the situations occurring in their life (Martin, Roman and Blum 1996). Even though this coping mechanism takes place in the bar, it is about the social support from their coworkers rather than drinking alcoholic beverages. In this case, going to “choir practice” is beneficial for officers to relieve some stress. They are drinking while talking in order to regulate themselves, their mood, and to make sense of their calls. In this light “choir practice” is not problem-drinking, but it is directly related to the job and the shift the officers work. The hours of their shift often conflict with working hours of their significant other so these officers become their support system. They interact with each

other and rely on one another in dangerous situations and share their personal information, so much that one officer referred to his partner as a “work wife.”

These experiences illustrate the importance of the organizational aspects of police work on the coping mechanisms used by individual officers. Investigators often have a partner that they work closely with on cases. These partners develop a close relationship that is not seen among the other ranks in the department. Sergeants in this sample often relied on their spouses as a way to vent and cope about situations or issues they are experiencing at work. In a way these high ranking officers must use external coping mechanisms to deal with stress from the department because they are not fully accepted at choir practice or during other gatherings.

Patrol officers working the afternoon shift cope with other officers during choir practice at the bar because that fits into their schedule. Unlike the officers working afternoons, the patrol officers working the midnight shift have a lower call volume and are able to meet up on various occasions during the night to discuss the same comments and complaints that afternoon officers talk about during “choir practice.” In the department the officers often use their coworkers as a means for coping with new situations on the job and stress from dealing with the bosses. However, the environment and time they have these discussions is dependent on the shift the officer works.

As the officer gains rank they lose some connection with the patrol officers. They are viewed as part of the administration, people that could get the patrol officers in trouble. For this reason the officers of higher rank use other sources to cope with stress from the job. They bounce ideas off of their significant others and call someone of equal

rank that works on a different shift. The officers interviewed in this study, no matter the rank, are looking for backup when they need it on a domestic violence call at 2 in the morning or when they need to talk to someone about their own problems at the end of their shift.

### *Future Research*

This study included a sample from a medium sized police department in the Northeastern United States that does not have a high number of violent crimes per year. Few studies have used qualitative studies of officers and significant others in order to understand policing and family life (Roberts and Levenson 2001). Limitations to this current study include that less than 10% of the officers in the department participated in the study. Recruitment was aimed at each shift in patrol and descriptions of the study were passed around the investigations offices. There were no officers in the study that worked the day shift at the time of the interview. This is correlated with the sentiment shared by the subjects that the day shift officers are the least helpful when new officers join the department and are in training learning how to perform their duties. The number of significant others interviewed for the study is lower than expected and therefore a full analysis of their views is difficult to generalize.

Future research should include a larger number of officers in order to get a broad range of rank, seniority, race, and age of officers in the sample. An interesting idea that can be explored in terms of experience in the department is the point in which they feel comfortable on the road. Many of the officers admitted that it took several years to learn what they needed to in order to perform their duties without extensive help from others.



Part of this can be attributed to the fact that they were trained in an academy that is not hands-on learning. Studying a department that has an academy geared more towards learning the job as opposed to the penal law will reveal whether a hands-on academy would be more beneficial to the officers. Would this allow for a smooth transition to the road with an understanding of their duties?

A comparison study may interview officers in a department that experiences a high volume of critical incidents versus one that has a lower number such as the department used in the current study. Their views of stressors may be different based on their experiences on the job. It is imperative to understand what is stressful for police officers in an effort to improve their health, family interaction, and keep citizens in their jurisdiction safe.

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## Appendix A- Informed Consent

My name is Maria Apruzzese, and I am a student at Union College in Schenectady, NY. I am inviting you to participate in a research study. Involvement in the study is voluntary, so you may choose to participate or not. A description of the study is written below.

I am studying how police officers handle the stressors that are inherent in police work and in life itself. I would like to ask you a series of questions about your job and the various ways in which you deal with this stress in hope of finding similarities and differences between officers that could be of help to you and your coworkers.

The information you share with me will be beneficial to researchers and public health workers who are trying to identify ways to help police officers and their families manage the stress from policing.

This interview will take about an hour of your time.

Every effort will be made to make your responses confidential. I will not link your name to anything you say, either in the transcript of this interview or in the text of my thesis or any other publications.

There is a risk that these questions may make you feel uncomfortable or relive certain stressful situations that may have occurred while in the line of duty.

Participation is voluntary. If you decide not to participate, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The police department will not be keeping track of who does or does not participate in this study. You can, of course, decline to any question as well as to stop participating at any time, without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you have any additional questions concerning this research or your participation in it, please feel free to contact me or my thesis advisor at any time.

I would like to make a tape recording of our discussion, so that I can have an accurate record of the information that you provide to me. I will transcribe that recording by hand, and will keep the transcripts confidential and securely in my possession. I will erase the tape after I transcribe it.

Sign below if you have received a full explanation of the study, know that it is completely voluntary, and you agree to participate. By signing you consent to being interviewed for this study.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

The researcher will use a digital recording device in order to tape record the full interview between the participant and the researcher. Your signature on the line below gives your consent to having this interview tape-recorded.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

You may contact myself or Dr. Stablein with questions you may have. A summary of results will be available upon request at the end of March 2014. If you have any questions about subjects' rights, you may contact the Union College IRB Co-Chairs: George Bizer (518-388-6228, bizerg@union.edu) and Joshua Hart at (hartj@union.edu).

## Appendix B- Police Officer Interview Guide

### Police Officer Interview Guide: Police Officer Stress, Coping Mechanisms, and Family Life

**Researcher: Maria Apruzzese**

#### **Introduction:**

This study is attempting to understand police stress and family life. These interviews are performed in an effort to learn about your opinions and experiences in the police profession. First, let us learn a little bit about yourself.

#### **Demographic Information:**

First I would just like to learn a little about yourself.

1. What is your gender?
2. In what year were you born?
3. What was your last degree achieved in terms of education?

#### **Family Information:**

4. What is your current Marital Status?
  - 4.1. How many years did you date?
  - 4.2. If married, how long?
  - 4.3. Were you with your significant other when you began your career as a police officer?
  - 4.4. When does your significant other work? Shift? Days off?
5. Do you have Children?
  - 5.1. What are their ages?
    - a) School? College?
    - b) Do they play sports? Karate? Drama club? Dance?
  - 5.2. If they are young-
    - a) who provides day care?
6. Would you describe yourself as a religious person?
  - 6.1. Do you attend church activities regularly?
  - 6.2. Does your significant other?

#### **Current Status in the Department:**

I would now like to talk about your career as an officer.

7. What is your current rank?
8. Number of years in the department
  - 8.1. Number of years at this rank if higher than a patrolman
9. Number of years as a police officer total
10. What are some of your previous jobs?
  - 10.1. Military?

- a) How do you think that has influenced the way you do your job? Is it a reason you became a police officer?
- b) Does this give you an advantage over people with no military experience?

### **Early years as a Police Officer:**

Let's talk about the initial stages of your career.

- 11. What were your experiences like when you first started the police academy?
  - 11.1. Describe your experience when you first left the academy?
    - a) What was family life like at that time?
    - b) How did you manage your time?
  - 11.2. Do you think it was stressful during your first few years compared to now?
    - a) Why?
- 12. Did you have to work any undesirable shifts when you first started?
- 13. What is your typical shift and days off?
  - 13.1. If this has changed, why did you choose your current shift as opposed to your original shift?
- 14. If they work the Night shift-
  - 14.1. what are some of the advantages of working this shift?
  - 14.2. When do you sleep?
    - a) Is this schedule affected by your children?
  - 14.3. Do you have trouble falling asleep?
  - 14.4. Do you have a routine before and after work?
    - a) Special routines, go get coffee,
  - 14.5. What do you eat before a shift?
  - 14.6. Is this different from when you don't work the next day?
- 15. 3-11 Shift
  - 15.1. when do you see your significant other when you work this shift?
  - 15.2. If you have children- do you get up and bring them to school/help them get ready in the morning?
- 16. Have you thought about advancing your rank?

### **Stressful Aspects of Policing:**

I'm sure you're well aware of all of the research surrounding policing and stress, In your opinion:

- 17. What would you say are the most stressful aspects of being a police officer?
- 18. When you've had a stressful day at work what do you do to relax?
- 19. Has these stressful experiences impacted relationships outside of your job at all?
- 20. Do you ever talk about aspects of the job with your significant other?
  - 20.1. Do they express worry about the inherent dangerous aspects of the job?
- 21. Has any aspect of your job forced you to miss out on family gatherings?
  - 21.1. Parties, children's sports or extracurricular activities?
- 22. When you have a stressful day at work does this change your attitude at home or maybe your activities? Or are you able to put that aside and get back to family business?

### **Health and Exercise:**



23. Switching gears to your personal health, how would you rate your physical health in general? Excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?
  - 23.1. Since you have become a police officer do you think your overall health has improved, gotten worse, or stayed the same?
24. Do you go to the gym or have an exercise regime?
  - 24.1. The gym at the station or the private gym?
  - 24.2. Who do you go with?
  - 24.3. Do you do yoga or meditate or anything like that?
  - 24.4. Do you go to the gym to stay in shape for your job or is it a way for you to get your mind off of work?

**Questions for a High Ranking Officer:**

Let's talk about your specific rank in the department.

25. Sgt or Higher:
  - 25.1. what were the most important reasons you chose to become a Sgt?
  - 25.2. Why did you get picked over others
  - 25.3. What is the most difficult thing about having rank?
    - a) What are the added stressors?
  - 25.4. Has your relationships with other officers changed? Or was it different when you were first promoted?
  - 25.5. As a veteran officer do you ever have newer officers ask you about how do deal with balancing home life and the job?
    - a) Dealing with stress?

**Stress in the Department:**

26. In terms of stress in your own department, do you know what resources are available to you in order to better cope with stress?
  - 26.1. Do you think people are worried about seeking out these services in fear of the stigma attached to it?
  - 26.2. If another officer was seeing someone about stress issues would you be worried about backing them up on a call or having them as your backup?
  - 26.3. Would knowing that they are having issues with stress change the way you interact with them?
  - 26.4. Since you have been an officer have the stress related resources in your department changed? What about the views on seeking help for stress?
  - 26.5. Have you ever reached out to use these resources?
  - 26.6. Sometimes when a stressful incident occurs in the line of duty, officers are mandated to seek help after critical incidents. Have you ever experienced this?
27. What percentage of your coworkers would you say you got along with?
28. Have you ever thought about transferring out of the department?
  - 28.1. If so, why?
29. Have you ever seen an officer having a hard time handling stress on your shift?

- 30. Do you think officers use prescription drugs in order to help them sleep or reduce anxiety?
  - 30.1. What about over-the-counter drugs?
    - a) Do you think officers use alcohol as a way to relax and unwind from a taxing shift?

### **Stress and Family Life**

- 30.2. Thinking about stress again, do you find yourself trying to create an emotional distance between a loved one?
- 31. Have they ever done a ride along?
  - a) If no, would you be comfortable with them doing one? Maybe with another officer?
- 32. Do issues at home ever spill over into work?
  - 32.1. When a problem at home occurs do you think your work is affected in any way. If so, can you tell me how?
- 33. Do you think other officers will let me interview them?
  - 33.1. Why not?

## Appendix C: Significant Other Interview Guide

### **Demographic Information:**

I would like to understand a little bit about you and your family.

1. To start off, What is your gender?
2. In what year were you born?
3. What was your last degree achieved in terms of education?
4. What is your marital status?
  - 4.1. How long have you been married or how long have you been dating?
  - 4.2. Were you together before they started in policing? If no, when?
5. Do you have Children?
  - 5.1. If so, what are their ages?
    - a) Are they in school or college?
    - b) Do they play sports? Karate? Drama club? Dance?
  - 5.2. If they are young-
    - a) who provides day care?
6. In terms of education, what is the last year you completed or degree earned?
7. Are you religious?
  - 7.1. Is your significant other religious?
    - a) If so, do you think this has helped dealing with the inherent stress in policing?

### **You and Your Officer: Shift Work:**

8. Now, I would like to talk about you and your office, what rank is your significant other?
9. If significant other has rank-
  - 9.1. After the promotion was there any changes in your life that were made by you or the officer?
    - a) Did the people they socialized with, the way they relaxed after work, or their overall mood change during this transition?
10. How long have they been a police officer?
11. What do you do for a living?
  - 11.1. What shift do you work?
12. What shift do they work?
13. If significant other works Night Shift:
  - 13.1. Do you stay up until they leave at night?
  - 13.2. Do you see them when they come home in the morning?
  - 13.3. Would you say this shift allows them to be more or less active in the children's lives?
  - 13.4. How have you managed to be flexible in working around this schedule?  
What was it like when they first started working this shift?
  - 13.5. Who brings the children to school or gets them ready in the morning? Who picks them up from school?
14. If significant other works the 3-11 shift:
  - 14.1. Does the significant other get to attend the extracurricular activities your

children take part in?

### **Your Relationship:**

15. Has your spouse's job as a police officer impacted your relationship in any way?  
If so, can you tell me how?
  - 15.1. Can you describe their mood after a typical shift?
16. Do you worry about your spouse being a police officer in anyway? If so, can you tell me in what way?
17. Do you worry about them if they come home late?
18. Do you have a system worked out in case they get an arrest or get tied up towards the end of the shift?
19. Do they tell you about things that happened during their shift?
  - 19.1. Has this changed from the beginning of your relationship/the time they began their career?

### **Health and Activities of the Officer:**

I would now like to discuss of the health habits of you and your officer.

20. How would you rate their overall physical health in general? Excellent, very good, good, fair or poor?
  - 20.1. Do you think this has increased or decreased since they have become a police officer or over the course of your relationship?
21. Do they work out regularly?
  - 21.1. Do you go with them?
22. Are there any activities you do together to relax?
  - 22.1. Walks in the park, yoga, running, meditation?

### **Stress in Policing:**

- 22.2. Transitioning into the stressful aspects of policing, have you ever noticed a time where they seem particularly upset or stressed about work?
    - a) Did you mention this to them? If so, what was their reaction?
23. Would you say their personality changed at all since they have become police officers?
  - 23.1. Do they ever seem disengaged at home with you or with the children?
  - 23.2. How does your Officer manage to meet your emotional needs after they have a tough day at work?
24. Do you think it has been easier to deal with the stressors of the job now that the officer is gaining more experience?
25. Have you ever done a ride along with your officer or another officer in the department?
26. Do you think Police Officer's in your significant others department use alcohol to deal with the stress in the job?
  - 26.1. Do you think Officers use prescription medication to help relieve anxiety

or to help them sleep at night?

27. Did you read any books or information about policing and their families and how to respond to different stressful situations?
28. Do you socialize with other police significant others?
29. Do you think spouses of Police Officers are ever worried about the troubles they hear about police marriages or relationships?
30. Things such as a disconnection or lack of interest?