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Stress & Self-regulation in Law Enforcement

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Stress & Self-regulation in Law Enforcement

A Thesis

Presented in

Fulfillment of the

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By

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine the relationship between self-reported stress and self-regulation skills in a sample of 57 law enforcement officers from the Chicago Police Department (patrol officers, detectives, sergeants, lieutenants, specialized units). Participants completed an anonymous survey that included the 31-item The Short Self-Regulation Questionnaire (SSRQ) and only the stress items of the 21-item Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale - 21 Item (DASS-21). We hypothesized that law enforcement officers high stress job results in poor self-regulation skills. Results suggest there is a significant negative correlation between stress and self-regulation. There was no difference for officers with and without dependents.

Keywords: stress, self-regulation, law enforcement, dependents

Stress & Self-regulation in Law Enforcement

COVID-19, riots, rising crime rates are only a few of the many stressors law enforcement officers experienced along with the public these past few years. Jhetro Royce, (2023) states that law enforcement officers were seen as essential workers during COVID-19, as result officers had to face sickness every day and have the fear of bringing it home. Even though we are no longer in a global pandemic, law enforcement officers job remains very complex, which is physically and mentally stressful (Webster, 2014 and Purba and Demou, 2019). Not only do law enforcement officers have societal responsibility and strict legal norms, but officers also have to face human misery, abused children and life and death situations (Violanti et al., 2017). Law enforcement officers must learn the skills to deal with risk, ambiguity, and unpredictability of their job (Violanti et al., 2017). Law enforcement officers are constantly experiencing violent attacks, death, and serious injuries (Buchanan et al., 2001, and Collins and Gibbs, 2003). Jhetro Royce (2023) states that officers deal with complicated situations daily and must make decisions in the blink of an eye. Police service is a difficult and a high-stress job (Jhetro Royce, 2023).

In addition to having a dangerous and stressful job, law enforcement officers also experience common stress like everyone else. Jhetro Royce (2023) suggests that officers' coping mechanisms can be changed by different kinds of stress, like operational and organizational stress. Occupational stress is when individuals are presented with work demands and pressures that do not match their knowledge and abilities (World Health Organization, 2020). An example of occupational stress would be that some police departments don't require any education or background focused on trauma or mental health crisis prior to getting hired and very minimal training is provided for officers on these subjects once hired. Organizational stress is within a

structure or organization, that can include conflicts with superiors or coworkers, staff shortages, job and work overload, and/or issues with leadership (Jhetro Royce, 2023). In an article from the Washington Post it was reported that The San Francisco Police Department is short 600 officers, the Phoenix police department needs 500 more officers to be fully staffed, 60% of 239 police agencies reported not being fully staffed (Klemko, 2023). Having staff shortages like this puts a lot of pressure of the officers and the leaders of these departments. Crime rates go up causing mandatory overtime that leads to burnout. Queirós et al. (2020) states that law enforcement officer's job has a lot of stressors, therefore officers must be resilient and learn how to manage the multitude of demands, if not it could lead psychological or mental diseases, or even suicidal behavior. Purba and Demou, (2019) state that if officers do not address the many stressors, it can also cause job dissatisfaction and/or mental health problems. Another stressor that some officers might deal with is dependents, whether it is their own children or a family member they care for. Dependents can be an emotional, financial, and possibly in even physical stressor for officers.

Self-regulation is a skill that many individuals use daily to help them achieve a variety of goals. Unfortunately, stress can make an impact on the development and practice of self-regulation. Stress among officers is conspicuous, whether it's the daily violent confrontations, death, abuse, trauma, long work hours, cancelled days off, mandatory overtime, constant scrutiny from the public, and little to no support from their own police departments. Self-regulation skills can be a huge benefit to an officer who is under high stress. They can help them decompress from all the stress and traumatic events they experienced through their workday. Menefee et al. (2022) stated that an individual's quality of life and well-being can be impacted if they do not learn how to emotionally regulate to internal and external stressors. Gajda et al. (2022) related that self-regulation skills are beneficial to an individual's life, it is linked to well-being and

mental health, individuals with poor self-regulation skills can be more susceptible to social stressors and are more likely to have addictions and psychosomatic diseases. Molińska and Olechowska (2022) suggested that an individual who possesses good emotional self-regulation can take control over their emotions and prevent impulsive behavior that can make situations worse and can also better their mood. Segovia (2024) states that researchers have concluded that police officers who used stress-coping techniques were more likely to reduce and manage their stress.

One might ask why is this important to care about and put time and effort to research? There are several reasons why it is important to take the time and invest in research in law enforcement: performance and effectiveness, public safety, burnout workforce morale, legal and ethical implications (Segovia, 2024). A more appropriate question we should be asking ourselves is, how can officers protect and serve communities when they are struggling themselves? Law enforcement officers deal with daily violent confrontations, death, abuse, trauma, long work hours, cancelled days off, mandatory overtime, constant scrutiny from the public, and sometimes no support from their own police departments. There are officers who struggle with their mental health, and then they are expected to go to work and solve other people's problems and make decisions in seconds. Segovia (2024) states high-stress levels can affect an officer's when they need to make decisions, it can also affect an officer's critical thinking skills. Segovia (2024) further states that managing stress levels can allow officers to carry out their duties, which leads to better outcomes for everyone. The stress officers endure is not a personal problem, is a community problem.

H1: Law enforcement officers have a high stress job which leads to poor self-regulation skills.

Because officers are under constant stress, officers can be emotionally, physically, and mentally exhausted at the end of their workday, leaving them too tired to even attempt to self-regulate. Some of those officers have dependents, whether they are emotionally, physically, or financially dependents; children, or taking care of a sick family member. Officers with dependents would have poor self-regulation skills because they don't have the time or space to practice those skills, they would most likely take care of their dependents first. If an officer has a child or a sick family member at home that they must attend to first, their own self-regulation gets pushed down to end of the to-do list. Therefore, the officer does not have time to practice those self-regulation skills and another type of stress gets added on top of the chronic stress they endured at from work.

H2: Law enforcement officers with dependents will show poorer self-regulation skills, in comparison to officers who don't have any dependents.

Method

Participants

Fifty-seven law enforcement officers from the Chicago Police Department (patrol officers, detectives, sergeants, lieutenants, specialized units), 41 males, 15 female, 1 preferred not to disclose gender, all ages 21+ years old participated in the study. Participants were compensated with food, such as pizza and donuts.

Measures

Stress. The world health organization defines stress as “a state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation.” (World Health Organization, 2023). The American Psychological Association defined stress as “the physiological or psychological response to internal or external stressors. Stress involves changes affecting nearly every system of the body, influencing how people feel and behave... By causing these mind–body changes, stress contributes directly to psychological and physiological disorder and disease and affects mental and physical health, reducing quality of life.” (APA, n.d.). Participants will only respond to the stress items from The Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale - 21Item (DASS-21). Participants indicate the extent to which they experience each of the items on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*Did not apply to me at all*) to 3 (*Applied to me very much, or most of the time*). (Al-Kalbani et al., 2022). Appendix A, the stress items will be *italicized* and **bolded**.

Self-regulation. According to Gajda et al. (2022) “self-regulation is defined as the ability of individuals to control their behavior, emotion, thoughts, and attention in order to achieve goals” (p.1). Gajda et al. (2022) related that self-regulation skills are beneficial to an individual’s life, it is linked to well-being and mental health, individuals with poor self-regulation skills can be more susceptible to social stressors and are more likely to have addictions and psychosomatic diseases. According to Molińska and Olechowska (2022), an individual who possesses good emotional self-regulation can take control over their emotions and prevent impulsive behavior that can make situations worse and can also better their mood. Participants will respond to a 31-item The Short Self-Regulation Questionnaire (SSRQ). Participants indicate the extent to which they agree with each item using a 5-point Likert scale: 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). (Potgieter and Botha, 2009). Appendix B.

Dependents. Participants answered a yes or no question regarding if they have dependents, and if yes how many. Participants will be provided definition of “Dependents are person who depends on you financially, emotionally and/or physically. Some examples of dependents include a spouse, child, stepchild, brother, sister, or parent.”

Do you have any dependents? Dependents are person who depends on you financially, emotionally and/or physically. Some examples of dependents include a spouse, child, stepchild, brother, sister, or parent.

Procedure

The process included an introduction and presentation at officer’s roll call before their tour of duty. It was explained to everyone at roll call that this survey aims to understand officers’ thoughts and feelings in their general work environment. It was further explained that the survey is optional and completely anonymous, no names or badge numbers were collected. The survey was accessible by scanning a QR code that was available to everyone presented at roll call. To ensure that the officers who chose to complete the survey stayed anonymous lead investigator stepped out the roll call room after the introduction and presentation. In accordance with IRB requirements, all participants received information on the study procedure and provide informed consent prior to participating. Everyone present at roll call was welcomed to enjoy the food (pizza/donuts), brought by the lead investigator, as compensation for their time and/or participation, regardless if they participated or not.

Data were collected from all watches (1st, 2nd, 3rd) from two different police stations, 002nd district and 009th district at the Chicago Police Department. A total of ninety-six anonymous surveys were collected. Each participant's survey was screened for compliance and

attentiveness by checking if participants answered the attention check questions wrong; if so, the data was deleted. Thirty-nine of the surveys were discarded due to failed attention checks, leaving only fifty-seven surveys to analyze. The final score of the DASS-21 stress items (see Appendix A), from each survey were multiple by two. Some of the items in the SSRQ- 31 were first reverse scored (see Appendix B), and after items were calculated by averaging across all items. The participants dependent answers were also recorded.

Results

We hypothesized that officers with high self-report stress leads to low self-regulation skills. High self-reported stress; low self-regulation skills. Officers with dependents will have even lower self-regulation skills. High self-reported stress; with dependents, lower self-regulation skills.

A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between stress and self-regulation. There was a significant negative correlation between the two variables, $r(55) = -.34$, $p = .010$. This is in support of our **H1**.

A two sample t-test was performed to compare self-regulation skills in officers who did have dependents and officers who did not have dependents. There was no significant difference in self-regulation skills between officers who did have dependents ($M = [4.11]$, $SD = [.56]$) and officers who do not have dependents ($M = 4.14$, $SD = [.56]$); $t(55) = -.154$, $p = .878$. Having dependents does not impact the correlation between stress and self-regulation.

According to Byrne (2001) a Confirmatory Factor Analysis CFA (CFA) is the most effective way to cross-validate the factor structure of a test. Al-Kalbani et al. (2022) related that “The CFA results showed an adequate fit to study data as all indices fulfilled the suggested

requirements for the adequate model (Bentler, 1990).” (p.3). Al-Kalbani et al. (2022) mentioned that the internal consistency reliability for each DASS-21 scale was assessed by Cronbach’s alpha. The reliability (alpha) coefficients for the three DASS-21 are shown in Table 2 in Al-Kalbani et al. (2022) study.

According to Potgieter and Botha (2009) a Cronbach alpha reliability analysis determine that the SSRQ-31 is 0.88 to 0.93 (Kammann and Flett, 1983). Potgieter and Botha (2009) also provided evidence that related that the total scale and extracted factors showed a high degree of criterion-related validity through strong correlations with various measures of psychological well-being. The correlations between the SSRQ subscales and various measures of psychological well-being can be viewed in Table 5 in Potgieter and Botha (2009) study.

Discussion

Our sample size was not ideal, and not what we aimed for, but even with a small sample size we were able to see a significant negative correlation between stress and self-regulation. This means that just because officers are under a lot of stress does not mean they practice self-regulation skills. This is important to acknowledge, just because an individual is put in situations where they should be practicing and enhancing their skills does not mean they are. Since there was no difference between officers with or without dependents for either self-regulation or stress, we must investigate why officers aren’t self-regulating. What obstacles are officers facing that prevents them from practicing self-regulation skills? There is little research done specifically on stress and self-regulation within the law enforcement officers in the United States. Future studies on this topic and/or replicas can help us understand the effects that stress has on an individual and whether these individuals can self-regulate from that stress or not, and more importantly how. It is important to take the time and resources to explore this concern because we all depend

on law enforcement. Being a police officer is a very stressful job as mentioned earlier, and it is vital for everyone to understand how officers cope with everything they experience. As previously stated, stress can disturb an individual's physical and psychological health. (American Psychological Association, 2022). In 2022, seven Chicago officers successfully committed suicide. Although the reasons are unknown, we know that stress influences mental health. Studies like this can provide findings that can help better understand if there is a relationship and hopefully find a solution. Future findings can also be applicable to any population that works in a high stress job, like emergency room doctors and nurses. Studies like this are important because those individuals working in those high stressful jobs, are individuals that serve our communities.

Future Directions & Limitations

It would be ideal to gather a larger sample size to determine if the relationship changes between stress and self-regulation. Even though dependents did not make a difference in our sample size, it should be reanalyzed with a larger sample size to confirm these findings. Future studies on this topic should focus on investigating why officers are not self-regulating, what are the obstacles that officers are facing, since dependents might not be a factor. It would also be interesting to collect an even amount of male and female data, to determine if there is difference between the genders. If there is, we would be interesting to see if any social roles play a factor in the findings. Other demographic information, like race and culture, should also be collected and analyze to determine if there any impact to the findings. The data collected in this study was collected from two south side districts of the Chicago Police Department. For future replications of this study, investigators should highly consider obtaining data throughout the city (south, north, west). It is important to consider the type of crimes that each district within the police

department encounter on the daily basis. Some areas of the city have more violent crimes compare to other areas. There can also be differences between ranks and/or teams' officers are in. For example, there is patrol, SWAT, Tactical Unit, Detectives, Sergeants, Lieutenants, any many more. It is ideal to determine what unit we are collecting data from, because they all have different kinds of stress. Future findings between ranks and teams can help determine if there are any difference between stress levels and how we can address each one. All in all, this will help us determine any differences and possibly give insight on how to tackle and navigate through this type of stress.

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Appendix A

The Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale - 21Item (DASS-21).

Participants will only respond to the stress items, in the DASS-21 scale, they are bolded below.

The DASS-21 is a short version of the DASS-42, therefore the final score of the stress items should be multiple by two. Participants indicate the extent to which they experience each of the items on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*Did not apply to me at all*) to 3 (*Applied to me very much, or most of the time*). (Al-Kalbani et al., 2022).

0 *Did not apply to me at all*

1 *Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time*

2 *Applied to me to a considerable degree, or a good part of time*

3 *Applied to me very much, or most of the time*

1. ***I found it hard to wind down***
2. I was aware of dryness of my mouth
3. I couldn't seem to experience any positive feeling at all
4. I experienced breathing difficulty (eg, excessively rapid breathing, breathlessness in the absence of physical exertion)
5. I found it difficult to work up the initiative to do things
6. ***I tended to over-react to situations***
7. I experienced trembling (eg, in the hands)
8. ***I felt that I was using a lot of nervous energy***
9. I was worried about situations in which I might panic and make a fool of myself
10. I felt that I had nothing to look forward to
11. ***I found myself getting agitated***
12. ***I found it difficult to relax***
13. I felt down-hearted and blue
14. ***I was intolerant of anything that kept me from getting on with what I was doing***
15. I felt I was close to panic
16. I was unable to become enthusiastic about anything
17. I felt I wasn't worth much as a person
18. ***I felt that I was rather touchy***
19. I was aware of the action of my heart in the absence of physical exertion (eg, sense of heart rate increase, heart missing a beat)
20. I felt scared without any good reason
21. I felt that life was meaningless

Appendix B

The Short Self-Regulation Questionnaire (SSRQ)

Participants will respond to a 31-item The Short Self-Regulation Questionnaire (SSRQ).

Participants indicate the extent to which they agree with each item using a 5-point Likert scale: *1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree)*. (Potgieter & Botha, 2009). (* items will be reverse scored)

1 (Strongly Disagree)

2 (Somewhat Disagree)

3 (Neutral)

4 (Somewhat Agree)

5 (Strongly Agree)

1. I usually keep track of my progress towards my goals.
2. I have trouble making up my mind about things.*
3. I get easily distracted from my plans.*
4. I don't notice the effects of my actions until it is too late. *
5. I'm able to accomplish goals I set for myself.
6. I put off making decisions.*
7. It's hard for me to notice when I've "had enough" (alcohol, food, sweets).*
8. If I wanted to change, I am confident that I could do it.
9. When it comes to deciding about a change, I feel overwhelmed by the choices.*
10. I have trouble following through with things once I've made up my mind to do something.*
11. I don't seem to learn from my mistakes.*
12. I can stick to a plan that's working well.

13. I usually only have to make a mistake one time in order to learn from it.
14. I have personal standards, and try to live up to them.
15. As soon as I see a problem or challenge, I start looking for all possible solutions.
16. I have a hard time setting goals for myself.*
17. I have a lot of willpower.
18. When I'm trying to change something, I pay a lot of attention to how I'm doing.
19. I have trouble making plans to help me reach my goals.*
20. I'm able to resist temptation.
21. I set goals for myself and keep track of my progress.
22. Most of the time I don't pay attention to what I'm doing. *
23. I tend to keep doing the same thing, even when it doesn't work.*
24. I can usually find several different possibilities when I want to change something.
25. Once I have a goal, I can usually plan how to reach it.
26. If I make a resolution to change something, I pay a lot of attention to how I'm doing.
27. Often I don't notice what I'm doing until someone calls it to my attention.*
28. I usually think before I act.
29. I learn from my mistakes.
30. I know how I want to be.
31. I give up quickly.*