

Addressing Burnout within Law Enforcement

Prepared for
Rachel Garsombke
Fox Falley Technical College

Prepared by
Madison Bushke
Student
Fox Valley Technical College

April 11th, 2025

INTRODUCTION

Law enforcement is seen on television, in movies, and on the news. Put on display as a thrilling field with constant heroics. The lesser-known issues plaguing law enforcement is the seemingly inevitable burnout of officers and the issues that come with it, such as physical and mental fatigue, slower response times and effects within the community. There are many studies that investigate the cause and effects of burnout as well as the number of officers experiencing this affliction, but little research showing how to improve the condition of the officers. Departments from local to federal levels are facing a staffing crisis unseen in years past, resulting in a few law enforcement officers doing the work of many. The purpose of this report is to examine the effect of burnout in law enforcement officers and the public, in addition to exploring solutions to aid in the mental and physical health of officers.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Problem Defined

To truly examine and explore solutions to burnout in law enforcement, one must examine the causes of the burnout. Department staffing problems have a direct reflection on law enforcement burnout. It's estimated that roughly 70 percent of law enforcement officers quit or retire within the first ten years for a multitude of reasons (Segovia). A major reason is job dissatisfaction, pushing officers towards less demanding careers with higher pay. Lower employment rates result in officers working much longer hours with fewer days off further causing imbalance between work and personal time. It's not to be dismissed that the traumatic nature of the job itself also influences burnout. Trauma has a direct correlation to burnout and turnover rate, especially amongst officers and investigators. Studies have shown that great exposure to disturbing media was related to higher levels of Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder (STSD) and cynicism resulting in a higher turnover intention as well (Perez et al.).

While the causes of burnout are an important factor to examine, the other side of burnout is the direct effect on the law enforcement officers themselves. Burnout can manifest itself in many ways and each person experiencing burnout will describe similar experiences, yet that experience will have its own unique aspects for everyone. Indicators of burnout can present themselves

physically or psychologically. Physically, those experiencing burnout report neck and shoulder pains, headaches, and musculoskeletal pains (Albieri Jodas Salvagiono et al.). Long term physical consequences can even result in prolonged fatigue, respiratory issues, severe injuries and even mortality below the age of 35. Psychologically, burnout can manifest through insomnia and depressive symptoms, resulting in an increased usage of antidepressants among those experiencing burnout (Albieri Jodas Salvagiono et al.). Burnout is more than just a long day at work, it's an ever-prevalent pandemic that has lasting physical and psychological effects on those who have prolonged exposure to demanding positions.

Now having context on both the causes and effects of burnout, it's important to examine the rates at which law enforcement experience this affliction. On average, it's believed that one in four employees, across various fields and demographics experience burnout (McKinsey & Company). However, study published in the Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology found that out of their pool of subjects, 45% of the male law enforcement respondents reported experiencing burnout (Anmut Endalkachew Bezie et al.). That same study indicated even higher rates of burnout for female law enforcement officers. This reflects that law enforcement officers experience burnout at a higher rate than the average individual.

Causes of the Problem

Further reflecting on the causes of burnout in law enforcement, consider that law enforcement is an increasingly dangerous field. The National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund published statistics regarding officer fatalities. In 2024, 147 officers in various departments, from federal to local, died in the line of duty (Mitchell). This reflects a 25% increase from 2023. In addition to the inherent danger one faces when working in law enforcement, there are social challenges as well. Aside from a demanding schedule that makes personal lives difficult to manage at times, law enforcement officers frequently receive heavy criticism from the public. While this is anticipated to a certain degree, as it is a public facing job, increased protests regarding questionable officer actions in addition to public demands to defund the police create additional stress which contributes to burnout.

Continuing with examining the causes and keeping the previous information in mind, there are further things to consider. It's crucial to then evaluate the resignation and retirement rate in comparison with the recruitment rate of departments. Reference figure 1 below, there's been a decrease in sworn staffing across departments of all sizes in various years, despite the hiring rate increasing, per the Police Executive Research Forum. Various causes are cited for the decrease in officers but most frequently mentioned are the understaffing of departments, the daily risks of working in the field, and the career lacking a healthy work-life balance, all of which are symptoms frequently present when discussing burnout.



Figure 1

Source: Police Executive Research Forum. "Staffing2023." *W*www.policeforum.org, 1 Apr. 2023, www.policeforum.org/staffing2023.

While the number of officers seem to be continually decreasing, emergency calls appear to be increasing. On average, its estimated there are about 240 million 911 calls made in the U.S. alone. While specific numbers are difficult to find on both a local and national level, it's overall determined that call numbers are steadily increasing. Short staffing in law enforcement departments in conjunction with an overall increase in both emergency and non-emergency calls result in longer response times. Salt Lake City, Utah released their response times for the time span of February 2021 to January 2022. These response times, across all priorities, reflected an on average 17.9-minute response time (Mourtgos et al.). While 17.9 minutes may not seem like a long time, per say, in an emergency, every minute counts. 2021 saw an increase in response times which Mourtgos, Adams and Nix attribute to staffing issues from both the Covid pandemic and the George Floyd incident, both occurring approximately one year prior. Increased call volumes not only effect the public but the officers responding, as they are consistently moving call to call and unable to dedicate the needed amount of time nor truly process a scene before they're being sent off to the next call. The constant need is a large contributor to the burnout rates amongst law enforcement officers.

Impacts of the Problem

When looking at the impacts of a problem, such as law enforcement burnout, it's important to address both the short-term and long-term effects. As we evaluate the short term effects of burnout, we look directly at the officers themselves and the consequences of burnout. As stated previously, there are physical and psychological health issues that can arise because of burnout. Additionally, these effects spill over from the officer themselves to those around them, specifically at home. A statistic that stands out is the divorce rate amongst law enforcement. While the national average for divorce sits consistently around 50%, for law enforcement officers it can be as high as 70% ("Officer Wellness Spotlight: The Law Enforcement Family"). While this cannot be wholly contributed to burnout, one cannot deny the correlation between stress and divorce. This is only one example of the personal short-term effects of burnout.

Transitioning to assess the long term, community relations can be an indicator of the effects of burnout on the greater society. Those experiencing burnout tend to be stressed, short with others, and generally short tempered. These side-effects bleed into the community as well as at home. Burnt out officers may be less willing to positively engage with their community, further eroding the relationship between the community and the police (Ella). To further support this, officers are known to experience what is referred to as “compassion fatigue.” Compassion fatigue is understood to be a result of continued exposure to traumatic situations and is also a symptom of burnout. Typically, compassion fatigue is seen as reduced empathy (Bosma and Henning). When compassion fatigue sets in, it impacts the community and personal life of those experiencing the condition.

The impacts of law enforcement burnout present themselves in a multitude of ways to various people who must interact with law enforcement. From family members, to the public, and even to the officers themselves, everyone is presented with the issue of burnout. There are the short-term effects of divorce and even increased domestic violence among law enforcement officers (Goodmark). The public receives longer response times with less time spent on cases. Officer’s health is severely impacted with the overall life expectancy of law enforcement officers at the age of 66 (Violanti et al.) while the average life expectancy is at 78 years, not to mention increased suicide rates amongst police officers. The effects and impacts are far spread regarding this issue.

CONCLUSIONS

When analyzing all the causes and impacts of law enforcement burnout, it’s clear this is an urgent and pressing issue that is prevalent throughout America. The main cause of police burnout is clear, staffing levels need to be addressed as it is likely that call volumes will not decrease. Recruitment and retention are the two main points that need to be focused on. When there are more officers in a department, this allows for more time off, more emotional relief and the ability to reestablish a healthy work-life balance. A better work culture will result in improve retention which means better staffing for the departments that desperately need it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are likely no “quick fixes” for an in-depth issue such as this. However, there are quite a few recommendations that could be made to address and alleviate this issue amongst all departments. One recommendation would be for departments to focus on their public image and recruiting. Recruitment is vital for any career in any field, especially law enforcement.

Improving law enforcement’s public image would be a start in drawing more people into a relatively intimidating field in addition to more departments working with local primary and secondary schools (French). A practice that exists currently and should continue with even more emphasis is departments hiring officers upon graduation and paying for their academy training so long as that individual comes to work for that department upon completion. This practice works well with offering young, new officers immediate employment and financial ease while going through the academy and provides departments with an employable officer whom they have minimal training upon graduation.

To address preexisting burnout, there also exists some potential solutions. One recommendation would be to catch, address, and resolve burnout before it reaches a “breaking point,” so to speak. Conducting regular Fitness-for-Duty Examinations (FDE) would create a general baseline for employees, essentially checking in every so often. Also essential, however, is that these examinations are more in-depth and specialized towards law enforcement and the trauma they face on a regular basis. Norman Hoffman, in the article *Police Violence, Racial Injustice, and Police Burnout after Floyd’s Death*, asserts that the already existing FDEs are not aimed towards officers specifically. For these examinations to have a true impact, they must address what officers face regularly. By utilizing these tactics, burnout within law enforcement could see some improvement, overall improving most police interactions.

Works Cited

- Albieri Jodas Salvagiono et al.) Perez, Lisa M., et al. “Secondary Traumatic Stress and Burnout among Law Enforcement Investigators Exposed to Disturbing Media Images.” *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, vol. 25, no. 2, 12 Mar. 2010, pp. 113–124, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11896-010-9066-7>.
- Anmut Endalkachew Bezie, et al. “Prevalence of Work-Related Burnout and Associated Factors among Police Officers in Central Gondar Zone, Northwest Ethiopia, 2023.” *Frontiers in Public Health*, vol. 12, 23 Apr. 2024, pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38716240/, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2024.1355625>.
- Bosma, Lori, and Stacy Henning. “Compassion Fatigue among Officers.” *FBI: Law Enforcement Bulletin*, 6 June 2022, leb.fbi.gov/articles/featured-articles/compassion-fatigue-among-officers.
- Ella. “Police Burnout: The Hidden Struggles Facing Law Enforcement.” *InTime*, 19 Nov. 2024, intime.com/resources/blog/police-burnout-the-hidden-struggles-facing-law-enforcement/.
- French, Ashley, et al. “Improving Recruitment.” *Policechiefmagazine.org*, 2023, www.policechiefmagazine.org/improving-recruitment/.
- Goodmark, Leigh. “Who Watches the Watchers: Domestic Violence and Law Enforcement.” *National Sexual Violence Resource Center*, 21 Apr. 2023, www.nsvrc.org/blogs/saam/who-watches-watchers-domestic-violence-and-law-enforcement-leigh-goodmark.

- Hoffman, Norman, et al. "Police Violence, Racial Injustice, and Police Burnout after Floyd's Death." *Research Ebsco*, 2020, research-ebsco-com.applibproxy.fvtc.edu/c/5budwn/viewer/pdf/rjtmzmdynj?auth-callid=68888ab0-857f-417e-8233-54e227ebae54. Accessed 12 Apr. 2025.
- McKinsey & Company. "What Is Burnout? | McKinsey." *Www.mckinsey.com*, 14 Aug. 2023, www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/mckinsey-explainers/what-is-burnout.
- Mitchell, Christopher. "2024 Law Enforcement Fatalities Report Reveals Law Enforcement Deaths Increased - National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund." *National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund*, 7 Jan. 2025, nleomf.org/2024-law-enforcement-fatalities-report-reveals-law-enforcement-deaths-increased/.
- Mourtgos, Scott M, et al. "Staffing Levels Are the Most Important Factor Influencing Police Response Times." *CrimRxiv*, 20 Feb. 2024, <https://doi.org/10.21428/cb6ab371.893efeb7>.
- "Officer Wellness Spotlight: The Law Enforcement Family." *FBI: Law Enforcement Bulletin*, 11 Feb. 2021, leb.fbi.gov/spotlights/officer-wellness-spotlight-the-law-enforcement-family.
- Segovia, Richard. *Scholars Crossing Scholars Crossing Faculty Publications and Presentations School of Education Overcoming Recruitment and Retention Challenges in Law Enforcement: A Systematic Review Enforcement: A Systematic Review Part of the Law Enforcement and Corrections Commons*. 2024.
- Violanti, John M, et al. "Life Expectancy in Police Officers: A Comparison with the U.S. General Population." *International Journal of Emergency Mental Health*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2016, p. 217, pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4734369/.