Law enforcement perceptions of job stress and barriers to supportive resources when working child sexual abuse cases in the southern United States

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper was to examine law enforcement officers' perspectives on job stress and barriers to supportive resources when working child sexual abuse cases in a large southern state. It is well documented in the literature that professionals who work in healthcare, emergency services and law enforcement face tremendous amounts of stress and consequences to their physical and mental health. Little research has been done to examine how child sexual abuse investigations impact law enforcement, and how these specialized officers perceive access to supportive resources.

Design/methodology/approach – This qualitative study was part of a larger quantitative study and included 20 law enforcement officers who participated in anonymous, semi-structured phone interviews.

Findings – Findings included (1) child sexual abuse cases are difficult, specialized and disturbing (2) barriers to supportive resources include law enforcement culture, the stigma of asking for help, awareness and accessibility of resources and leadership as gatekeeper to the resources and (3) officers perceive both formal and informal resources to be helpful and at best should be proactively available to all officers in the state. A model of the findings was developed to illustrate the implications for practitioners and scholars.

Research limitations/implications – This study was not without weaknesses, specifically the small number of participants, volunteer sampling does not represent the general population and the sampling technique means some demographics may have been missed by researchers.

Practical implications – This study adds to the literature on law enforcement mental health, occupational health and mental health resources. It confirms established research in the literature and provides insight into officer perspectives about barriers that prevent access to informal and formal supports that could improve their emotional well-being.

Originality/value – This study is the first of its kind, to our knowledge, that asks detectives and investigators of child abuse cases about mental health resources. These law enforcement officers are at high-risk for traumatic stress, compassion fatigue and burnout due to the specialized cases they investigate.

Keywords Child abuse, Law enforcement, Mental health, Police culture, Police resources

Paper type Research paper

Introduction
Deep within law enforcement is a long-standing tradition and culture built on the appearance of strength, masculinity and pride (Gutschmidt and Vera, 2020; Pickett and Nix, 2018; Sanders et al., 2022). Positive aspects of this include a team and diligence culture while

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negative aspects include the “suppression of negative emotions” (Gutschmidt and Vera, 2020, p. 965) and isolation from others (Wright et al., 2006). The sustainability of this culture comes into question as increasing numbers of officers report overwhelming job stress, adverse impacts on their mental and physical health, high turnover, family discord, and police suicides continue to occur (Allison et al., 2019; Queirós et al., 2020; Waters and Ussery, 2007).

As a result of early research, law enforcement agencies across the United States implemented formal resources to help their officers cope with job stress. These resources included Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), conference funding, and preventative programs. One problem quickly identified was that police culture impeded officers from utilizing these resources (Waters and Ussery, 2007). Additional impediments included lack of privacy, risks to confidentiality, distrust of mental health clinicians, fear of losing their job or promotions, and side effects of psychotropic medications that are prescribed for depression, anxiety, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Waters and Ussery, 2007). These are all important aspects of police culture that act as barriers to accessing resources for coping and mental well-being.

The combined impact of culture and stigma within law enforcement is a meaningful phenomenon worthy of exploration, and officer perspectives on these issues are understudied. The research that has been conducted tends to look at law enforcement in the aggregate sense while Padilla et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of considering specialized units’ experience and management of stress, as their findings suggest there were similarities with investigators and patrol officers, but investigators in specialized roles have sources of stress that are unique to those roles. Studies have identified the difficulty and stress of working child abuse cases in law enforcement (see MacEachern et al., 2011; Violanti and Gehrke, 2004; Wolak and Mitchell, 2009). These cases regularly include disturbing and shocking content (MacEachern et al., 2011; Wright et al., 2006). Child abuse case investigation is also time-consuming and involves coordination among thousands of other agencies (National Children’s Alliance, 2024). The process itself requires time to develop specialization and confidence. This study explores how child abuse investigators perceive how police culture impacts their well-being and access to helpful resources.

Literature review
Researchers have concluded that “professionals who are regularly exposed to the traumatic experiences of those they serve, such as healthcare, emergency, and community service workers, are increasingly susceptible to developing compassion fatigue” (Cocker and Joss, 2016, p. 1). This type of stress has been studied among forensic interviewers (FI) who are trained to interview abused children. FI stress is caused by witnessing the suffering of children, the emotional demands of their work, and repeatedly hearing traumatic abuse stories. The combination of legal liability, long hours, and high workloads similarly contribute to work-related stress for these professionals (Walsh et al., 2018). Similar findings are reported about Children’s Advocacy Center personnel (Brady et al., 2019; Perron and Hiltz, 2006) as well as child abuse prosecutors, child welfare workers, and law enforcement (Letson et al., 2020).

The Children’s Advocacy Centers’ (CAC) organizational structure is intended to benefit victims and their families and provide a one-stop shop for the investigation and prosecution of offenders (National Children’s Alliance, 2024). This includes case coordination between law enforcement jurisdictions, CAC employees, medical and mental health workers, every District Attorney’s office, and every region of the Department of Protective and Regulatory Services (National Children’s Alliance, 2024). However, the unique multidisciplinary structure and high number of abuse cases also create factors that contribute to law enforcement job stress (Bowen and Nhan, 2021).

Police work within Children’s Advocacy Center’s (CACs) entails many additional sources of stress including inter-agency collaboration and friction among stakeholders (Bowen and
Job stress and barriers to resources

Nhan, 2021; Newman and Dannenfelser, 2005; Wright et al., 2006), administrative and organizational pressure (Queiros et al., 2020), lack of resources and poor management (Queiros et al., 2020), and feelings like guilt, overburdened, psychological exhaustion (Quieros et al., 2020; Waters and Ussery, 2007) and the “inability to make a difference” (Waters and Ussery, 2007, p. 175). Individual factors can include whether officer coping is active or passive. Examples of active coping can include planning, positive reframing, and acceptance while passive coping can include distraction, denial, disengagement, substance abuse, and self-blame (Allision et al., 2019).

Gehrke and Violanti (2006) found that law enforcement officers who investigate child abuse are a high-risk population for exposure to traumatic stress and that working with victims of serious crimes is one of the greatest risk factors for trauma symptoms including compassion fatigue and burnout (Gehrke and Violanti, 2006). It is similarly reported that child abuse cases are “increasingly traumatic” and “the most traumatic cases” that are marked by a “stair-step phenomenon” in which trauma builds upon itself (MacEarchern et al., 2011, p. 332).

The impact of stress on officers who investigate Internet Crimes Against Children has been studied over the years. Brady (2017) found that one in four of these specialized investigators exhibit high levels of secondary traumatic stress and burnout due to frequent exposure to disturbing material, low organizational support, and feeling overwhelmed with their caseloads (Brady, 2017). Similar findings have remained consistent in studies among officers from Internet Crimes Against Children task forces (Bourke and Craun, 2014; MacEarchern et al., 2011; Wolak and Mitchell, 2009). Additionally, a 2018 study found that 66% of these specialized officers had some degree of secondary traumatic stress or scored within the severe range of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (MacEarchern et al., 2011).

When law enforcement officers utilize resources, they most commonly seek out peer support through case debriefing, humor, and social interactions that build a sense of camaraderie (Gutschmidt and Vera, 2020; MacEarchern et al., 2011; Wright et al., 2006). Peer support can include informal discussions about cases and eating meals together. The utilization of informal support is likely common because it is not formally documented, and it does not challenge the “Boys’ Club” culture within law enforcement (Sanders et al., 2022, p. 655).

Despite the growth of mental health awareness among law enforcement agencies, formal resources such as counseling or unit psychologists come with an automatic barrier: the stigma of police officers asking for help. This stigma reinforces the long-standing police culture of strength, minimizing feelings, and self-isolation (Allison et al., 2019; Waters and Ussery, 2007). This stigma is also based on several factors such as fear of being labeled unfit for duty and denied promotions, fear of being perceived as weak and ineffective at their job, and fear of losing their jobs (Waters and Ussery, 2007). These are common and real fears that prevent many in law enforcement from seeking help when it is needed. Gender is a contributing factor to stigma and culture within law enforcement, as it is well documented in the literature that men are less likely to seek counseling (Doward, 2016), and 83% of officers in the US in 2022 were male (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022).

To combat the stigma of asking for help and the police culture of suppressing feelings, a state-wide Law Enforcement Peer Network (TLEPN) was created in Texas in 2022 to provide a confidential 24/7 hotline for officers. Their mission is to “end police suicide” in their state and they sell t-shirts with the slogan “Together we fight the stigma.” In addition to the hotline, TLEPN provides referrals to counseling, peer-to-peer training, and an app that officers can download to their cell phones (Smith, 2022; TCOLE, 2023).

Despite these findings, more research is needed to examine the perceptions of law enforcement officers engaged in this traumatic work, specifically their views on stress factors and the informal and formal resources available to them. Additionally, there is a lack of research examining these factors among law enforcement officers who work in large states where unique aspects of child abuse investigation exist for example, a large number of law
enforcement agencies, high caseloads, and expansive geographical distances for investigators to travel. Another continuing problem is the recent finding that the southern states are ranked among the worst for mental healthcare (Masterson, 2023). While it has been reported that “hundreds” of law enforcement officers signed up for a new mental health mobile app in one southern state in 2022, it was also reported that only 46 officers utilized its services in the inaugural year (Smith, 2022). Therefore, it is beneficial to examine child abuse detectives’ and investigators’ perceptions of mental health resources available to them in the South, as well as when they access formal or informal support, and what barriers prevent them from doing so.

Methods
The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perspectives of law enforcement officers who investigate child sexual abuse on the issues of job stress, mental health resources, and barriers that prevent access to these resources. This study was a follow-up to a quantitative project conducted in partnership with a state-level agency that advocates for children advocacy centers (CACs).

Utilizing a non-probability sampling method, participants were recruited from the original quantitative study in 2022 and self-selected for this follow-up study. This sample included law enforcement officers from 15 CACs in a southern state. The sample was not random as participants from the larger study volunteered to participate by providing their phone numbers in the survey material. No names were connected to phone numbers or requested during the interviews to ensure participant anonymity. Of the original 49 volunteers, nine phone numbers were reassigned or no longer in service, and 20 volunteers agreed to participate in the follow-up interviews, yielding a 41% response rate. All participants were given the option to complete a Zoom or phone interview, and all chose the phone interview.

Eligibility criteria included law enforcement experience working on child sexual abuse investigations and having participated in the original study. The lead researcher conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to gain a deeper understanding of job stress, mental health resources, and barriers that prevent access to those resources. For this study, job stress, also known as work-related stress, was defined as the response someone has when presented with the demands and pressures of their job. Mental health resources are any action or strategy that can be adopted in adverse conditions while barriers are any obstacles that prevent or impede resource access.

The semi-structured approach allowed participants to utilize personal perspectives and experiences to better explain their views on job stress and access to mental health resources. The interview instrument (Appendix) used in this study included 5 questions that focused on training, resources, and emotional support accessibility. All voluntary interviews were conducted in the spring of 2023. The researcher utilized a printed interview script as the base for the interview which allowed for flexibility during the interview. The average interview was 18 min and 45 s, with the longest interview being 42 min and the shortest interview being eight minutes.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis by the main researcher on the same day they were conducted. Code Rules were established for inductive themes (see Table 1) which refer to the “spontaneous creation of codes the first time the data are reviewed” and is a common “data-driven method” for most qualitative researchers (Saldana, 2013, p. 41). Coding was conducted line-by-line by the main researcher and coding occurred in 5 rounds to increase reliability. Thematic analysis of interview data is common and appropriate to examine phenomena when there is little research on a topic as is the case with this specialized population of law enforcement. Additionally, coding categories directly from data is common and can increase the trustworthiness of a study (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).
Results
Among participants who disclosed their length of service in law enforcement (n = 6), the shortest amount of time was <5 years, while the greatest was more than 40 years. All answers were collected, analyzed, and categorized into eight initial codes: peer support, difficult cases, no-mistake cases, priority cases, needs, caseloads, mental health, and stress. After five rounds, these codes were then categorized further: difficult and complex cases, emotional impact, culture and stigma, and mental health resources. Based on the codes, the following results were found.

Difficulty and complexity of cases
The difficulty and complexity of child abuse cases were one theme found in this study. Participants referred to the emotional difficulty as well as the amount of time and energy required to investigate these cases. As one participant stated, “These cases are so complex. They require as much time as homicide.” Other participants (n = 7) discussed the pressure of working crimes against children cases. For example, one participant stated, “My worst fear is always getting a kid case. You don’t want to screw that up. This is a very specific investigation; you have to do things in a specific order and in a specific way. I tell other officers: you can’t screw this up, you can’t.”

Another participant stated similar concerns about the specialized nature of the cases that involve complex skills such as learning to interrogate suspects. The implication is that child abuse cases require specialized training and time to develop confidence in these skills. In addition, participants (n = 17) reported what makes these cases difficult is that the victims are children. As one participant stated, “I treat every case like it’s my own child. I care so much for these kids, and I want to be able to help them.” Personal care and commitment to helping abused children seemingly increase the level of pressure and stress felt by the investigators. One participant stated, “There are things that shouldn’t be done to kids, some who can’t defend themselves or even talk. That is rough.”

Participants who view Child Sexual Abuse Material (C-SAM) as part of their investigations discussed the large number of disturbing images that come with the nature of the job. One participant stated, “These are images of young ladies being sexually abused. There are probably 50–60 victims.” Another participant reported having to examine “over 500,000 images on a computer” while looking for C-SAM. These statements reflect the repetitive and intense nature of the traumatic images they are exposed to. This presents a factor unique among participants working with C-SAM compared to those who do not. For example, a child abuse investigator may have one or more alleged victims involved in a single case. C-SAM cases, by nature, involve increasingly large numbers of victims and images that are disturbing and traumatic.
Emotional impact

Participants \((n = 11)\) also discussed the emotional impact that child abuse investigations have on them. They described their cases as “disturbing,” “serious,” “haunting,” “horrible,” “too awful,” and “too difficult.” Three participants described investigating Child Sexual Abuse Material (C-SAM) cases as “disturbing,” “emotional,” “rough,” “gross,” and “you can’t make it go away in your mind.” The disturbing and emotional feelings experienced by participants reportedly impact turnover when feelings become overwhelming and coping is not in place. One participant stated, “I’ve seen too many times... officers lost. They’re working these child crimes and it’s just mentally and physically taking such a toll on them. It’s a lot.”

One participant described a situation involving a former colleague. He stated, “There had been all kinds of complaints about him, terrible stuff, that he was rude and mean, lots of complaints about him. He told me on his days off he went home and locked himself in his bedroom and sat in the dark all day. We got him some help. No one else knew about it.” Despite the help, the colleague left the department. It was clear from participants in this study that the emotional impact of child sexual abuse investigations can lead to turnover.

Changing culture and stigma

Participants with many years of experience discussed the changing stigma that exists within law enforcement culture. Historically, police culture included strength, masculinity, and pride, and these factors contributed to a stigma against asking for help or expressing emotional difficulty with the case content. As one participant stated, “When I first started you didn’t express any kind of weakness. If you went to a really difficult scene, you didn’t say that was really hard. You just dealt with it. If you were to say oh that was difficult, that was a sign of weakness, and you didn’t show that.” Similarly, another participant stated, “Before, it was just no one ever talked about it.”

The stigma of asking for help was another theme in this study. The stigma exists around officers not wanting to appear weak or incapable of the work, and not wanting to be seen as weak for needing help. While most participants felt that the stigma will always remain within law enforcement, two participants expressed hope that younger detectives are creating positive change, and they see the stigma slowly softening. A new generation of detectives who appear comfortable discussing feelings and mental health are reported factors that contribute to the softening of the stigma.

Another cultural aspect of law enforcement identified by participants included departmental gossip. Participants \((n = 3)\) described this commonality among agencies and described it as a barrier to asking for help. Specifically, one participant stated, “You don’t want people talking about it in the hallway, and you know cops are the worst gossips about stuff like that.” The culture of gossip, as reported by participants, contributes to the stigma and fear of appearing weak or incapable of doing police work. These are strong fears in a culture built on strength, masculinity, and suppressing emotions.

Resources for mental health

The mental health needs of child abuse investigators were another theme. Specifically, participants indicated the need for chiefs, sergeants, and senior detectives to “spearhead” formal and informal peer support among their departments. Participants perceived that police chiefs who validate the difficulties of child abuse cases and who understand the time and complexity involved in investigations are more likely to implement mental health resources and peer support for their officers. Once these resources are led by and supported by the department leaders, police officers may feel less stigma and less fear attached to asking for help.

Participants reportedly felt supported in their departments when they were able to talk about difficult cases, relay feelings, and receive feedback that normalized their feelings.
Participants experienced this informal support by talking with older investigators, having meals together, validating the difficulty of the cases for each other, and checking in on one another after a difficult day. These descriptions likely represent the informal mental health support they experience through social interactions with one another. Officers benefit from informal peer support as they validate the difficulty of the work for one another.

Aside from informal interactions, some departments offer formal resources for their officers. One participant expressed frustration at the formal resources and stated, “We have two psychologists and that’s great, but we have 1,400 people (officers) and two psychologists.” The participant further described the feeling of being “surrounded by people who provide services to help others” such as victim services, psychologists, and therapists but “we can’t discuss our own issues with them.” The perception that help is available but not accessible appears to create a sense of isolation and frustration among at least one participant.

Another participant expressed frustration with the formality of using health insurance to locate a therapist. He stated, “I have to find three hours to make phone calls to find a counselor. If it were easier, I think more people would use it to get help. We all have the same insurance. When do I have three hours to call a bunch of counselors and see who is taking my insurance?” Similarly, another participant stated, “The support system is pretty weak except for some places that have recognized it needs to be done.”

Participants (n = 9) expressed the need for leadership to commit to providing proactive, simple, and accessible resources that are formal and informal, including: confidential peer support, a culture that normalizes the unique stress of child abuse investigations, a non-punitive culture that encourages asking for help, and updated access to professional support like counseling. One participant stated, “Coping is needed. The anonymous system could be if you felt like you needed some help, you contacted your supervisor, and your supervisor went straight to the chief. So, they are the only other people involved, and that would work out really well.” Another participant stated, “I’m not really impressed with what we have. Some of the larger agencies have an employee program where you could request help anonymously and no one knew about it. But our support system is pretty weak.”

Participants (n = 4) spoke highly of formal Peer Support Programs established within their departments. They expressed concern for small, more rural agencies that do not have access to formal support and interventions. One participant reported hearing about a mental health app for law enforcement. However, the participant had not used the app and did not know if anyone else used it. Still, the participant emphasized, that the app was a good idea because the resource was established and available when it was needed. Additionally, one participant reported hearing good things about detectives who utilized Eye-Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy (EMDR) with a professional counselor. The participant reported this intervention has helped detectives who view C-SAM “get those images out of their heads.”

Participants discussed whether unit leaders are the gatekeepers of formal resources and ultimately whether the resources are viewed as valuable and made available to officers. This means that the resources might be available, but they are not supported or encouraged by a culture within leadership that still views asking for help as an indicator of weakness. This factor was evident as two participants in leadership roles stated, “We would use that (resources) if we felt like we needed to, but we don’t” and “none of my investigators have ever come forward to say hey this is bothering me.”

Most participants (n = 12) in this study reported that informal and confidential peer support was most helpful and comfortable. One participant reported, “We have a dedicated unit with officers specially assigned to reach out to other officers. It’s all confidential. I would say this resource is so much better than when I first started.” Participants also reported the benefit of having senior detectives, chiefs, and sergeants who “noticed when someone seemed off” and checked in with detectives directly. Participants described this kind of informal support as
helpful because it was private, individualized, and validated the difficulties of the job. For example, one participant stated, “They (officers) eat lunch together every day. They ask questions of each other; they are each other’s sounding boards. It is so helpful to talk through that stuff.” Another participant reported, “We have some incredible senior detectives who really have the passion and spearheaded training the newer detectives. They are the same senior detectives that younger detectives will go talk to. They know they can relay any feelings.”

An identified need from two participants included training new detectives about feelings to expect when working child abuse cases. One participant stated, “Remove the details of the cases and allow the detectives to understand what they might be feeling, what to expect when they are working these cases, you know, let them know these feelings are normal.” Two participants suggested this training would allow new detectives to have a proactive understanding of how they may be impacted by child abuse investigations. Starting from a proactive perspective may help decrease the stigma of asking for help, and it may increase the comfort level of talking about distressing emotions related to the cases.

**Discussion/conclusion**

Reported concerns about culture and stigma in law enforcement in this study are consistent with previous research (Gutschmidt and Vera, 2020; Pickett and Nix, 2018; Sanders et al., 2022). Specifically, the participants in this study discussed a history of not talking about feelings or the emotional difficulty of case investigation which is also similar to previous findings (Gutschmidt and Vera). However, participants also reported that the police culture is slowly changing due to leadership commitment to officer wellbeing and a younger generation that is more comfortable talking about mental health.

Most participants in this study reported that informal and confidential peer support was most helpful and comfortable, as opposed to formal resources like counseling. This is likely due to the stigma surrounding formal supports such as seeing a counselor or a psychologist and fears of losing job status or confidentiality. This is also consistent with previous findings about fears related to the stigma of seeking professional help (Queiros et al., 2020; Waters and Ussery, 2007).

Participants cited the need for formal mental health resources to be proactive and already established for them to access. The findings of this study indicate that a proactive approach prevents officers from having to find resources on their own or appear weak if they ask for formal help. This research also indicates that established formal resources are likely to improve accessibility, immediacy, and privacy. However, a concern remains whether officers are aware of available resources and if hearing about positive results would encourage more participation. Specifically, informing investigators on the number of peers who accessed resources and found them helpful may serve as validation and motivation to utilize the same resources while also decreasing the stigma of seeking help.

Researchers created a diagram (Figure 1) to illustrate identified stress factors faced by child abuse investigators, the informal and formal resources they perceive, and the goal of

![Diagram of Emotional Wellness Pathway](image-url)
police emotional wellness. Job stress identified by participants included the specialized nature of child abuse cases, the complex and time-consuming nature of these investigations, and the emotional impact of working on disturbing cases involving the sexual abuse of children. The path to wellness was clearly described by participants who provided examples of informal and formal resources they knew of personally or through others including comradery, checking in with each other, having meals together, asking for help, counseling, trainings, and a mental health app.

Researchers created a second diagram (Figure 2) to illustrate the barriers that prevent officers from accessing resources that could assist in their coping with job stress. Identified barriers include police culture of strength, the stigma of asking for help, unaware of what resources are available to them, not being able to connect with resources, unaware if other officers are experiencing benefits from the resources, and leadership as gatekeepers to the resources. Consequently, these barriers result in inaccessible and unused resources that could benefit law enforcement’s mental and physical health.

Practical recommendations include that law enforcement administration be proactive by providing informal and formal resources for all investigators, creating easier access to the dissemination of resources, and sharing data on the number of officers accessing these resources. A proactive approach increases accessibility to resources because investigators do not have to ask for help when it is needed. Instead, they are already aware of informal and formal support and the paths to access it. For example, formal support includes a mental health app and informal support includes seeking out a senior-level officer to process a troubling case. A barrier to accessibility occurs each time an officer needs to request a formal resource, and this is likely perceived as a weakness within police culture. Therefore, accessibility is likely to increase when informal and formal resources are equitable for all. Sharing data with officers is beneficial because it serves as validation and motivation to seek out support and helps decrease the stigma by normalizing the practice of seeking support. For example, if officers see data that indicates mental health services are accessed by their peers, the stigma is likely to decrease, and they are more likely to seek out support.

Previous research has highlighted the importance of increasing active coping and decreasing passive coping among law enforcement officers (Allison et al., 2019). Participants in this study offered solutions that included active coping strategies such as planning and positive reframing through the availability and dissemination of resources and leadership validation of the complexity and difficulty of child abuse investigations. They also described passive coping by themselves or their peers which included distraction, denial, and disengagement, and these are strategies that are likely to exacerbate poor coping and contribute to barriers that prevent wellness.
This study also reflects the social implication that police culture change needs to happen from the top down so that investigators do not fear negative repercussions (formal such as job loss or informal such as gossip) for talking about their feelings and asking for help. Participants in this study provided examples of these barriers and how they experience them on a macro and micro level. Their experiences were consistent with what is known in the literature about police culture and stigma, and the impact of job stress on mental and physical health.

An additional social implication includes the incongruence between leadership and participant perception. The literature is consistent that law enforcement officers face unique and overwhelming stress factors that impact their physical and mental health, and participants in this study presented the same perception. However, the opposite was expressed among two participants who self-identified as being in leadership roles. This contradicts research findings and reinforces the negative factors of police culture. More research is needed on the presence of incongruence between leadership and investigators to identify how widespread the problem might be, and to help steer solutions such as leadership training on investigator perceptions of stress.

Knowing how specialized child abuse investigators perceive stress and the available resources benefits the police practitioners because it identifies the problem in the officers’ own words, and it provides a path toward officer emotional wellness. Having a clear path to officer wellness can help this high-risk population avoid long-term and maladaptive coping to traumatic stress and burnout. This study also advances the literature by focusing on child abuse investigators because they are a specialized and understudied segment of law enforcement.

This study was not without weaknesses, specifically the small number of participants, volunteer sampling does not represent the general population, and the sampling technique means some demographics may have been missed by researchers. More research is needed to identify if law enforcement leaders can recognize warning signs that their officers need help but are afraid to ask. Additionally, future research is needed to evaluate the frequency of use and the perceived effectiveness of formal and informal resources for law enforcement officers. This study adds to the literature on law enforcement mental health, occupational health, and mental health resources. It confirms established research in the literature and provides insight into officer perspectives about barriers that prevent access to informal and formal supports that could improve their emotional well-being.

References


Appendix

(1) What do you think about the resources law enforcement have when working child sexual abuse cases?

(2) What are some resources that would help law enforcement with their job?

(3) What are some training opportunities that the CAC could offer to help law enforcement?

(4) What do you think about the emotional support or resources available to law enforcement to help with the difficult things you see and hear in these cases?

(5) What additional information would you like to share?

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