

Final Summary Overview

Law Enforcement Officers Safety and Wellness: A Multi-Level Study

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BACKGROUND

The Officer Safety and Wellness (OSAW) Initiative, created in 2017, aims to assess the myriad of safety and health concerns of law enforcement officers (LEOs) in the United States. Building on the original study (OSAW-A; 2016-IJ-CX-0021), in 2018 the research team launched OSAW-B (2018-R2-CX-0026) to build on the first wave of data, and to conduct a longitudinal national survey of LEOs and correctional officers (COs), to examine the state of officer safety and wellness, job satisfaction, and job performance. The overarching goal was to support researchers, agency leaders, and policymakers as they address the risk factors for LEO and CO wellness and safety.

Law enforcement is a high-stress occupation, with challenges arising from job-related stressors and organizational/administrative stressors, as well as a perceived lack of support from community members, particularly heightened after the murder of George Floyd in 2020 by the Minneapolis Police (Mumford et al., 2022; Regehr et al., 2019; Syed et al., 2020; Velazquez & Hernandez, 2019). This stress can accumulate in the body and is associated with declines in officer mental and physical health (Juster et al., 2010; McEwen & Stellar, 1993). LEOs are twice as likely to develop cardiovascular disease as other professions (Anderson et al., 2002; Franke et al., 1998), the rate of officer suicidality (particularly among female officers) is of grave concern (Mumford, Liu, & Taylor, 2021; Violanti & Steege, 2020), and the occupational fatality rate is nearly three times the U.S. average (Maguire et al., 2002). Left un-addressed, continued exposure to high stress may have negative effects on officers' morale, job satisfaction and performance, and may lead to increased turnover (Mourtgos et al., 2022)

The specific objectives of this phase of OSAW research were to [1] Identify the range of beliefs about the prestige of LEO/CO work and officer job satisfaction, as well as the longitudinal patterns of officer stress and resilience among officers (building on OSAW-A measurement of stressors, safety and health, and the extent to which these estimates vary by gender and by officer assignment); [2] Investigate how officer job satisfaction and perceptions of occupational prestige affect their stress, resilience, and job performance, and the extent to which this relationship varies by gender and officer duty assignment; and

[3] Identify whether job satisfaction impacts officers' coping skills and resilience, and whether coping skills and resilience moderate the association between stressors, stress outcomes, and job performance.

METHODS

The OSAW Sample

The sampling frame for the OSAW initiative was the 2017 National Database on Law Enforcement Agencies (NDLEA). For details on how agencies and officers were selected to participate in the original OSAW sample (Wave 1), please see the [OSAW-A Final Report](#).

All officers eligible to participate in Wave 1 of the Officer Safety and Wellness Initiative (OSAW) survey were re-invited to participate in Wave 2. LEOs were excluded from the Wave 2 sample if they were screened out at Wave 1, not able to be contacted at Wave 1, or were from one of two agencies that submitted anonymized rosters with no LEO contact information at Wave 1. A total of 9,256 LEOs were invited to participate at Wave 2.

Correctional Officers were newly eligible to participate in the OSAW initiative at Wave 2. To select COs for the sample, the research team began by contacting sampled county LEAs at Wave 1 to request a roster of their correctional personnel from which to select a sample. To increase the number of COs represented in the OSAW initiative, the research team decided to include an additional 500 county LEAs to include in their roster eligible group. After removing ineligible agencies, rosters were requested from a total of 810 eligible county LEAs. The research team followed the same protocol in requesting rosters as in Wave 1 (Mumford et al., 2020).

Although longitudinal cohort studies usually are only fielded to baseline participants in subsequent waves, because the OSAW baseline sample was going to be enhanced through the recruitment of COs (new to the study), the research team reinvited all eligible LEOs who were initially invited to participate in the Wave 1 survey, regardless of baseline participation.

All LEO and CO officers who completed a survey at Wave 2 were invited to complete the survey at Wave 3. A total of 1,879 officers were invited to Wave 3, as 44 COs that completed a Wave 2 survey were unable to be invited to complete Wave 3, as their agency requested that officer emails not be

distributed to the research team, and instead used alias email addresses that removed any officer identifiers. The research team was unable to re-establish contact with this agency at Wave 3 to receive permission to re-field the survey, and thus the officers were removed from the sample.

Developing the OSAW Instruments

The core of the officer-level OSAW instrument was developed for Wave 1 of the survey (Mumford et al., 2020) drawing on existing measures and reviewed in collaboration with the OSAW Expert Panel. In reflection of Wave 1 results and the current research aims to study occupational prestige and officers' job satisfaction, the research team conducted a pilot study in 2019 with three agencies (two law enforcement agencies and one county correctional agency within a sheriff's office), located in the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic areas.

Phase one of the pilot study involved a brief survey, fielded to 106 officers from the three agencies to inform and refine measurement in the subsequent waves of the national-level survey. The pilot study captured measures of job satisfaction, job performance, occupational prestige, occupational stress, community policing beliefs, and the Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS) (Cohan et al., 2006).

Phase two of the pilot study consisted of six focus groups (two at each of the three agencies, involving both line officers and command staff) to capture officers' views on their community's beliefs about the prestige of police and correctional work, officers' stress and subsequent coping skills to manage stress, and the impact of community beliefs coupled with media attention on officers performance and job satisfaction.

The research team updated the officer-level survey at Wave 2 based on findings from phases one and two of the pilot study, after which the PERF team conducted cognitive interviews with a small sample (n=9) of LEOs and COs to assess the quality, clarity, and length of the OSAW Initiative instrument. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic that occurred just after launching Wave 2, the

research team added two questions to the Wave 2 and Wave 3 surveys capturing COVID-19 metrics (B. G. Taylor et al., 2023).

Phase three of the pilot research – developing and testing heart rate variability (HRV) data collection protocols in a law enforcement setting – was postponed due to in-person protocols established just before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, in 2023, the research team re-engaged with the participating correctional agency to conduct phase three of the pilot activities. An expert in resilience training provided a brief overview of stress, resilience, and HRV for a group of COs, after which participating officers (with informed consent, one by one, in private rooms) followed researchers' guidance during two periods of HRV measurement. The first measurement consisted of a five-minute HRV reading (via earlobe pulse monitor) during which the officer was at rest, while the second measurement was a one-minute reading during which the officer controlled their breathing by following a rhythmic indicator on a screen.¹ After the HRV measurement, the officers participated in brief interviews with research staff to provide feedback on the protocols and their thoughts on feasibility of implementing the resilience techniques and HRV measurement in their daily lives.

OSAW Measures

The instrument collects measures of personal demographics and duty assignments, health care use, work/lifestyle factors (e.g., fruit and vegetable consumption, smoking) and physical activity and sedentary behavior.

We captured a variety of risk factors, including exposure to adverse childhood experiences (ACES) at baseline, and at Wave 2 for those officers that did not participate at Wave 1 (Blosnich et al., 2014). We also captured exposure to critical incidents using a modified version of Weiss et. al.'s (2010) scale, including questions on experiences of sexual harassment and assault by a fellow officer. Expanding to officer safety, the survey included questions on traffic accidents, their use of equipment (seat belts,

¹ Protocol development was informed by consultation with Dr. Rollin McCraty, HeartMath Institute Research Director, and Jackie Waterman, HeartMath Institute Researcher.

harassment, building off of analyses conducted in OSAW-A (B. G. Taylor, Maitra, et al., 2022). Over one in four (28%) of officers reported having been sexually harassed by a fellow officer at some point in their career. This statistic masks the binary gender gap, with 66% of female officers reporting having ever experienced sexual harassment, compared to 13% of male officers. Using logistic modeling, marriage/cohabitation was protective against harassment, while working a rotating shift and higher levels of administrative stress were both risk factors for female officers. Finally, female officers who had worked as officers for more than 26 years were much more likely to have ever been sexually harassed, compared to female officers with 11-15 years of experience. These OSAW findings highlight the need for agencies to improve their agency policies, culture, and internal enforcement to prevent workplace sexual harassment. More attention to this issue for the male-dominated workforce may also be constructive for recruiting and retaining female officers.

Binge Drinking, Stress, and Resilience – Using multivariate logistic regression models, Dougherty et al. (under review December 2023) found that the odds of officers binge drinking monthly, or more frequently, increased with exposure to critical incidents as well as with higher levels of administrative stress. While the relationship between stress and binge drinking did not vary by level of officer resilience, officers with higher levels of resilience had lower odds of binge drinking. These OSAW findings indicate the importance of recognizing and mitigating stressors as well as building resilience among officers to reduce binge drinking behavior. Prior OSAW research has highlighted concerns about problem alcohol use among female officers, and further research examining the domains in which women in policing have or can build resilience is warranted (Mumford, Liu, & Taylor, 2021).

Occupational Prestige – Hudak et al. (under review December 2023) examine how LEOs view their occupation and the level of prestige that law enforcement holds for themselves and in their communities. Using multidimensional EPA measures (Freeland & Hoey, 2018), as well as traditional measures of occupational prestige, the research team found that officers view their occupation as more prestigious, morally good, and active, but less powerful than they believe the public views it. Furthermore, following George Floyd’s murder by police, LEOs viewed their occupation as less

prestigious and believed the public's perceptions of the prestige and "goodness" of policing was significantly lower. This methodological approach provides significantly more insight to officers' perceptions than global measurements of job prestige, that tend to reflect socioeconomic standings, and thus may be informative for internal training as well as external recruitment strategies. Further, these results highlight the effect of public criticism on officers' morale regarding their profession. Taken in concert with Mumford et al.'s (2022) qualitative research, the OSAW Initiative results bring novel insights to the law enforcement and correctional professions.

Correctional Officer Health Profiles – Using a latent class analysis (LCA), the research team examined the health profiles of correctional officers in the OSAW sample (results not published). The LCA resulted in a 3-class solution of CO health – 68% were classified as healthy, 23% classified as poor physical and behavioral health, and 8.9% were classified as having moderate behavioral health and poor cognitive health. Respondents classified in the healthy class were characterized by low physical health problems, low risk for drinking, drug use, and suicide. The healthy class also reported low emotional distress, low attention deficit, executive functioning deficit, memory deficit, and perceived stress. On the other hand, respondents within the poor physical health and behavioral health had the highest reported physical health problems, risky drinking drug use, and suicide risk. This group also reported high emotional distress and perceived stress. The smallest class (less than 10% of the respondents) reported high risky drinking and moderate suicide risk, and very high deficits for all cognitive measures: attention deficit, executive functioning deficit, and memory deficit.

Several characteristics of correctional officers were associated with the health profiles. Compared to the healthy class, COs in the poor physical and behavioral health (AOR=0.32, p=0.010) and COs in the moderate behavioral health and poor cognitive health (AOR=0.25, p=0.036) were less likely to be female. Further, compared to the healthy class, officers in the moderate behavioral health and poor cognitive health were more likely to have 1-4 years of military experience (AOR=3.27, p=0.041) than no military experience. By contrast, compared to the healthy class, officers in the poor physical health and poor behavioral health were less likely to have less than five years of military experience (AOR=0.07,

p=0.024) than no military experience. Further examination of COs' health profiles relative to LEOs' health profiles is warranted (Mumford, Liu, & Taylor, 2021).

Implications

Through two grants from the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) funding for the Officer Safety and Wellness (OSAW) Initiative, the research team has developed the first nationally representative longitudinal study of law enforcement officer safety and wellness, generating four nationally representative datasets (the cross-sectional agency survey and the three longitudinal officer surveys), archived and available for further analyses.

Insights from OSAW Initiative analyses to date underscore the importance of the agency environment/climate for supporting officer well-being, from addressing perceived stigmas regarding mental health issues, to leading by example during public health emergencies, to making wellness programming accessible to officers. Additionally, OSAW Initiative research has highlighted the potential value of an easily self-administered brief tool, the Patient Health Questionnaire-15, for officers to check privately on their own wellness; education about using the tool accompanied with information about accessible resources through the agency may complement peer support groups and other law enforcement approaches to supporting officers. OSAW Initiative research has also emphasized the importance of identifying and addressing symptoms of low resilience and learning effective coping skills, to manage the challenges that come with a high-risk profession.

In sum, this study provides LEA administrators, policymakers, and officers with more data on the status of officer health and safety, as well as the potential to identify ways to improve officer health outcomes, job satisfaction, and job performance. These indicators are of course important to maintaining the well-being of the municipal, state, and federal workforce in the public safety sector. Additionally, however, the intersection of officer safety and wellness and public safety is critical to the general public and community safety. Optimal decision-making and officer performance are in the interest of public safety, and best supported by officers who are in a good position to integrate trainings, cope with

stressors, and adhere to agency protocols. Emotional regulation and coping skills can be built, and can help officers reduce stress, negative emotions, and depression (Abotalebi et al., 2023; Berking et al., 2010; McCraty & Atkinson, 2012; Nelis et al., 2011), and officers with personal resilience and agency-level support are likely to be more satisfied with their jobs and thus perform better in the line of duty (Mumford et al., Under Review). Taken together, the OSAW results can be used by LEAs to highlight the need to address officer health and safety issues which, if ameliorated, may help with both low recruitment and the retention of officers – key barriers the field of law enforcement is still facing (Police Executive Research Forum, 2019).

Several limitations should be considered in interpreting these findings. First, all data is self-reported and are subject to respondent recall and other biases (e.g., social desirability). Second, after three waves of longitudinal surveys, two of which occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was significant officer attrition – from 2,867 LEOs in Wave 1 to 1,000 LEO/COs in Wave 3. While all analyses are weighted to be nationally representative and we can adjust for observed response bias through the use of weights (e.g., by gender or race), there may be unobserved bias in sample retention. For example, officers under more stress due to the COVID-19 pandemic may have not had the bandwidth to participate in the survey. Third, to ensure a low burden on respondents, we made efforts to use briefer versions of validated scales, and made decisions to shorten surveys based on findings from Wave 1 and the pilot study that preceded Wave 2. Therefore, some detail may be missing in terms of construct measurement, and some results may not be precisely comparable to other samples.

Our results highlight the current state of agency wellness programming and officer safety and health. The analyses included in this report and conducted as part of this study are not intended to be used to identify healthy or unhealthy officers, nor to identify agencies with better or worse policies, organizational culture, or wellness program offerings. We hope these results are informative for agency leadership to better understand the health and wellness needs of their officers when reflecting on their policies and programs, as well as for officers to better understand their own health and wellness and experiences within their agency.

Appendix A. Law Enforcement Officers – Weighted Descriptive Characteristics

Variable	OSAW Wave 1 (N=2,867)		OSAW Wave 2 (N=1,924)		OSAW Wave 3 (N=1,000)	
	%/mean (SD)	N Missing	%/mean (SD)	N Missing	%/mean (SD)	N Missing
Officer Type				0		0
Law Enforcement	100%		84.0%		87.4%	
Corrections	-		16.0%		12.6%	
Race		26		3		8
White	78%		78.2%		81.8%	
Black	7.3%		8.7%		6.7%	
Hispanic	9.2%		9.2%		7.6%	
Other	5.6%		3.9%		3.9%	
Gender		22		0		1
Male	87.0%		74.9%		75.1%	
Female	13.0%		25.1%		24.9%	
Age	41.44 (9.6)	29	43.42 (9.5)	1	45.39 (8.91)	3
Years Sworn		17		4		5
0-5	19.0%		14.2%		9.1%	
6-10	14.4%		13.8%		13.2%	
11-15	16.1%		16.8%		14.5%	
16-20	19.5%		18.9%		18.8%	
21+	31.4%		36.3%		44.52%	
Education		12		0		3
High school	6.8%		8.2%		6.8%	
GED/equivalent	0.7%		1.0%		1.0%	
Some college, no degree	25.6%		24.7%		25.3%	
Associate's degree	19.7%		16.4%		15.0%	
Bachelor's degree	36.6%		37.2%		37.7%	
Master's degree	9.8%		11.5%		13.1%	
Professional school	0.5%		0.6%		0.6%	
Doctoral	0.2%		0.4%		0.5%	
Rotation status		52		1		0
Never	33.6%		35.1%		31.6%	
Yes, but not currently	46.9%		47.1%		19.6%	
Yes, currently	19.5%		17.8%		48.8%	
Duty Assignment		10		0		1
Officer/Deputy/Trooper	47.8%		40.7%		34.8%	
Corporal	5.2%		5.1%		4.3%	
Sergeant	17.1%		18.3%		20.2%	
Lieutenant or above	13.2%		16.5%		23.3%	
Investigator/Detective	11.0%		12.4%		12.2%	
Other	5.8%		7.0%		5.2%	
Sector		38		13		52
Only urban	40.6%		36.6%		37.7%	
Only suburban	21.9%		24.2%		27.8%	
Only rural	16.2%		17.0%		16.0%	
Mix of urban and suburban	6.2%		5.4%		5.4%	
Mix of urban, suburban, and rural	7.6%		5.7%		5.1%	
Other	7.5%		11%		8.0%	
Second job outside of agency				4		4
No	61.7%	94	58.7%		63.5%	
Yes	38.2%		41.3%		36.5%	
Hours worked per week in your department	44.8 (8.3)	36	44.9 (9.1)	4	44.8 (9.2)	7

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