

MEDIA, POLITICS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT: HOW THE CURRENT POLITICAL  
CLIMATE AND MEDIA COVERAGE ARE LEADING TO FEWER LAW  
ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS IN THE FIELD

By

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the degree of

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## ABSTRACT

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory has been used extensively in the business field to explain job satisfaction of employees. This study applied Maslow's theory to law enforcement by examining how the media and political rhetoric is impacting the support officers receive from the communities that they serve as well as the agencies that they work, and how this support is impacting the number of officers leaving the profession. The study sampled law enforcement officers located in western and central North Carolina and involved both large urban agencies and small rural agencies. The Professional Quality of Life (ProQoL) survey was used to determine the rate of burnout and compassion fatigue, while supplemental questions gathered data on decisions made about early retirement. One-on-one interviews were used to explore the reasons officers are leaving the profession as well as the challenges the media and political rhetoric is creating for law enforcement officers using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory as a guide. Survey results discovered both rural and urban agencies had a similar percentage of officers who have contemplated early retirement, but larger agencies had a larger portion who are planning to retire early. Interviews revealed that officers do not believe that media coverage or political rhetoric are directly causing officers to leave. Instead, most officers believe that the fear of negative media coverage and the accompanying political fallout is causing agencies to be more less proactive and less likely to support their officers. Those interviewed report that the resulting lack of trust in their agencies as a primary reason are leaving the profession.

*Keywords:* law enforcement, early retirement, media, politics

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

When the London Metropolitan Police force was created in 1829, it helped to establish a blueprint for other law enforcement agencies around the world to follow. In the decades and centuries that followed, law enforcement agencies have undergone numerous changes in organizational structure, tactics, training, and several other areas. Law enforcement agencies have become a constant in modern society and are viewed by many as a necessary part of modern life to ensure that we can continue to live in a peaceful law-abiding society. In the United States law enforcement has a very rich and varied history that spans from the early colonial days, to the wild west, to the type of law enforcement that is currently in place today. It would be untrue to say that law enforcement has been free of controversy or other issues. However, despite all of the problems that have impacted law enforcement and the public's perception of the profession, the majority of people continue to view law enforcement as a respected and noble profession.

Today the law enforcement profession is facing numerous challenges. Changing population demographics, changing values, and political ideologies all pose unique challenges to law enforcement agencies across the country. Nevers (2019) identifies retention of officers and recruitment of new officers as one of the greatest challenges facing law enforcement today. Law enforcement requires a unique combination of skills and temperament to handle the sometimes daunting demands that officers face. Studies have shown that law enforcement officers experience stressful events at a much higher rate than other professions and can result in impaired psychosocial well-being and physical health (Acquadro, Varetto, Zedda, & Ieraci, 2015). It is because of the elevated stress and trauma that officers are routinely subjected to that

many believe to be why more officers are leaving (Price, 2017) while fewer officers are entering the profession. Furthermore, over the past few years law enforcement as a profession has become involved in an ongoing controversy stemming from what is seen to be an increased number of officer involved shootings of unarmed minorities, particularly young black males, and minorities dying in police custody. However, looking back over the past several decades the statistics show that the rate in which blacks and Latinos are shot by the police has decreased. In 1978 black suspects were shot at nearly an eight times higher rate than were whites, but by 1998 that rate had decreased by fifty percent to a four times higher rate (Duran & Loza, 2017). When covering certain violent crimes, and in this case, officer involved shootings, the media has a tendency to focus on the most outrageous instances and fail to provide necessary information to properly contextualize the situations covered (O'Hear, 2020). Instances such as the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, have helped to drive the media narrative that black males dying at the hands of law enforcement has become an epidemic in the United States. It has also led to increased riots and protests across the country as well as calls from some to defund and do away with the police. Today's media driven narrative, and the resulting policy and public opinion effects, could be having a significant impact on the number of officers who are deciding to leave the law enforcement profession via early retirement or are just leaving outright. Simply put, the media's approach to and methods of covering certain events can have a direct impact on the public's opinion of law enforcement (Holbrook & Kisamore, 2018), and when that opinion is unfairly negative, officers feel unsupported and increasingly unsafe (Bejan, Hickman, Parkin, & Pozo, 2018). When officers perceive the backing of the public, their departments, and elected officials to be eroding, this can cause them to walk away from the profession.

## **Background**

Law enforcement is a demanding and complex profession. Officers are exposed to trauma of varying degrees on a daily basis, and this repeated exposure can cause both short and long-term stress related impacts (Jetelina, Beauchamp, Reingle-Gonzalez, Molsberry, Bishopp, & Lee, 2020). Stress related medical conditions have long been recognized as a major reason for officers seeking early retirement or medical disability (Price, 2017). Those who enter the law enforcement profession are typically aware of the negative consequences and possible dangers of the profession but officers today, and the law enforcement profession at large, are facing even more obstacles and new sources of stress. In the past few years, the news media have begun to focus heavily on some of the most extreme examples of officer involved shootings of black males (O’Hear, 2020) and have created the narrative that law enforcement officers are routinely killing young black males strictly due to the color of their skin. This media and resulting politically driven narrative have caused many in the public and in government to openly call for the defunding of law enforcement and, in some cases, doing away with law enforcement totally. Evidence exists that media coverage of these events have caused officers to become less proactive to avoid civil liability and negative publicity, which, in turn, has led to a spike in homicide rates and other types of violent crime (Rosenfeld & Wallman, 2019). The riots seen across the United States during the summer of 2020 and the months leading up to the 2020 presidential election may have been made worse by the media’s coverage of these events as ample evidence exists that reporters use well-defined scripts when reporting such events and how they are framed (Martin, Rafail, & McCarthy, 2017).

## **Historical Significance**

Law enforcement has become a mainstay in modern society. Citizens look to law enforcement to ensure order, enforce the law, and help to hold offenders accountable for their actions. Recruitment and retention of law enforcement officers have always been an issue for departments but have become an even greater issue in recent years. Individuals considered to be a part of the baby boomer generation and have gone into public sector careers, such as law enforcement, have shown to be dependable and dedicated to their chosen professions. However, younger generations, particularly those in the millennial generation, have been shown to be less likely to choose a career in the public sector including law enforcement, and are more likely to leave the profession at an earlier age (Piatak, 2017). In order to help increase the number of recruits and to help ensure that new recruits will be successfully retained, many law enforcement agencies have begun to implement new recruiting strategies that include financial incentives and social support systems for recruits (Nevers, 2019). Despite these incentives and initiatives, the number of new law enforcement officers entering the profession continues to decline. At the same time officers are retiring early at an increased rate (Price, 2017). The job of law enforcement itself and the dangers that officers face have not changed significantly through the years, but what has changed is how much scrutiny officers attract from citizens and particularly the media. The increasingly sensationalized negative media coverage of law enforcement and the emergence of social media have added a new stressor to an already stressful career and could be a major reason more officers are leaving the profession.

## **Social Context**

Law enforcement officers and private citizens often view the same situation through vastly different lenses. Law enforcement officers and agencies are typically concerned with whether

officers act within legal limits of the law, within agency policies, and within constitutional restraints, whereas citizens typically evaluate an officer's actions by what they consider *procedural fairness* (Meares, Tyler, & Gardener, 2016). This concept of fairness used by the public to judge the actions of police officers has led to a large disconnect between how the public view the actions of police officers as compared to how the officers themselves view their actions. In other words, what may be ruled as legal and justified by law enforcement and the courts may be considered wrong, and in some cases even criminal, by members of the public. There is no area where this disconnect is more evident than in the relationship between law enforcement and minority communities. Minorities are significantly more likely to report being treated disrespectfully by law enforcement and thus are much more likely to report a very negative opinion of law enforcement in general (Novich & Hunt, 2017). The role that the media plays in this opinion of law enforcement has been shown to be extremely important. The context (or lack of) that accompany police videos can highly influence viewers' opinions of law enforcement actions. Videos of police interventions, such as body- or dash-cam videos, and the way they are presented have been shown to directly impact public opinion and support of law enforcement (Boivin, Gendron, Faubert & Poulin, 2017).

### **Theoretical Context**

According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs there are five basic levels: physiological needs, safety and security needs, psychological needs, self-actualization and peak performance. Maslow's theory further states that the most basic of these needs must be met before higher level concerns can be addressed. Typically, this theory is applied to employer/employee relationships in determining how satisfied an employee is with their job. However, considering that law enforcement is a unique profession this theory can be applied to the relationship that officers

have with the public in which they serve, and this is where the role of the media comes into play. Traditional media as well as internet news sources and social media can greatly impact attitudes toward law enforcement and about law enforcement's legitimacy (Intravia, Wolff & Piquero, 2018). Applying Maslow's theory, we can assume that the public's opinion of law enforcement directly impacts an officer's safety, security, and psychological needs thus impacting an officer's job satisfaction and pushing many to leave the profession.

Law enforcement is not only a dangerous profession, but it is also quite complex. Law enforcement officers not only have to deal with situations that pertain strictly to law enforcement, but also must perform other functions that do not necessarily relate to their profession, such as counselling, mediating, and rendering aid to those in need. In this regard, law enforcement can be seen as a helping or care-giving profession. This places law enforcement officers at risk of suffering what is known as compassion fatigue, much like other professions such as social workers, nurses, and other care-giving professions. All officers are at risk of suffering from compassion fatigue; however, officers who are exposed more regularly to distressing situations or materials are at an even greater risk of suffering secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout (Denk-Florea, Gancz, Gomoiu, Ingram, Moreton, & Pollick, 2020).

The Professional Quality of Life (ProQol) model has been well established in public safety and other helping professions to measure various traumatic work-related experiences. The ProQol is used to measure how the stresses of the job impact an individual's level of compassion fatigue, satisfaction, and burnout (Stamm, 2010). This model has proven to be very valuable to public safety and healthcare agencies in enhancing their personal and workplace management strategies to better help their employees deal with the stresses of the job (Lachman, 2016).

### **Situation to Self**

The law enforcement profession is one that I have a particular and vested interest in. After spending over twenty years in law enforcement as an officer, trainer, and educator, I have watched the profession change drastically over the years and have witnessed a steady decline in the number of officers remaining on the street. Also, in my role as a trainer for law enforcement recruits, I have seen a significant decrease in the number of individuals who desire to begin a career as a law enforcement officer. Given the events that have occurred over the past few years and the increasingly negative media coverage of law enforcement in general, I am concerned that officers are going to leave the profession at a rate that will make it almost impossible to recruit enough new officers to replace those that are retiring early or simply leaving the profession outright.

### **Problem Statement**

Police work has always been and always will be a stressful and often dangerous profession. Law enforcement plays a critical role in maintaining order and ensuring that we can live in a peaceful society. Over the past few years law enforcement has become a major focus of the news media and, as a result of this media coverage, a focus of politicians and public policy. The overarching problem is that law enforcement officers are taking early retirement at an increasing rate for various reasons (Price, 2017). This increased amount of turnover is placing significant strain on many departments. At the same time that law enforcement agencies are losing officers at an increased rate, they are also facing greater difficulties in recruiting enough qualified officers to replace those that they are losing (Gibbs, Lee & Bachnak, 2018). Increased media scrutiny, as well as law enforcement coverage on social media, has been linked to this increased turnover (Fridkin, Wintersieck, Courey & Thompson, 2017; Nix, Wolfe & Campbell,

2018). In addition to turnover, the number of individuals seeking employment in law enforcement is declining. According to the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), interest in law enforcement has decreased substantially. For example, according to PERF, the cities of Nashville and Seattle have seen the number of yearly job applications received drop by over 50 percent since the year 2010 (Jackson & Lee, 2018). The majority of data that has been collected on these issues tend to deal with larger agencies in major metropolitan areas such as Dallas, Baltimore, and New York. Smaller, more rural agencies have often been neglected and little attention has been paid to how these agencies are dealing with these issues. These smaller agencies are the focus of this research; however, larger agencies are used in the research to provide a comparison sample and to allow for a more detailed and accurate picture of the problem to be generated. Of particular concern is how the media's portrayal of law enforcement and the resulting public opinion impacts these smaller agencies in terms of retention and recruitment of officers. Focusing on agencies located in western North Carolina counties, officers surveyed will provide insight into how public and political opinions impact their desire to continue working in law enforcement, seek early retirement, or to leave the profession outright. In addition, those surveyed will provide information about the role that traditional and social media plays in their decision.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study is to understand the number of law enforcement officers who are considering early retirement, or simply considering leaving the profession, and to determine how much of a driving force media coverage and political climate are for officers located in small rural agencies that have been largely uninvolved in recent civil unrest and riots, as well as some larger agencies that may have been involved in this unrest. At this stage in the research,



consideration of early retirement will generally be defined as thoughts or intentions of leaving the law enforcement profession prior to completion of the typical years of full service, which is normally twenty-five to thirty years. The basic theory guiding this study is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs which was proposed by Abraham Maslow in 1943, as it details how workers require that their safety, security and psychological needs must be met in order to remain content in their profession. In this case the current portrayal of law enforcement in traditional and social media undermines these needs and increases an officer's desire to leave the profession early.

### **Significance of the Study**

Various recent controversies involving law enforcement officers and the civil unrest that followed, particularly those that plagued the summer and fall of 2020, resulted in a significant amount of anecdotal evidence that these events have prompted many law enforcement officers who are leaving the profession early. This anecdotal evidence has contributed to the idea that media coverage and how the media has framed these events is one of the major factors driving this increase in officer turnover. Numerous studies have been conducted analyzing the influence that the media plays in influencing public opinion, which in turn, impacts political policies. Fridkin, Wintersieck, Courey and Thompson (2017) were able to show a direct link between media framing and public opinion when covering instances of police use of force. At a PERF gathering of law enforcement agency officials from across the country, many of those in attendance attributed many of the issues surrounding law enforcement to a couple of factors: 1) diminished perception of the police following the shooting and the unrest that followed in Ferguson, Missouri; and 2) an increase in public and media scrutiny of police through the rise of social media (Jackson & Lee, 2018). In addition, the ability that the media has to impact public opinion is not just limited to law enforcement. The way that the media covers, or slants, a

particular story can alter public perception of any type of organization (Holbrook & Kisamore, 2018). The proposed study seeks to apply Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory, which is typically applied to traditional workplace settings and employer policies, to the relationship that law enforcement has with the public and communities that they serve and how that public support, or non-support, directly impacts how well and how free officers are to do their jobs which impacts an officer's job satisfaction.

It is the responsibility of law enforcement administrations and law enforcement leaders to try to reverse this trend of increased turnover and declining applications (Jackson & Lee, 2018). Much of the data that has been collected about these issues comes from mostly large agencies with the effects on smaller agencies inferred from the data collected from these larger agencies. The intent of this study is to better understand how small rural departments that have not been directly impacted by recent civil unrest are being impacted by increased officer turnover and what is the motivating factors causing these officers to leave these departments early. The hope is that by gaining a better understanding of what is driving these issues, these departments can develop new strategies to combat these issues.

### **Research Questions**

The ever-changing environment in which police officers work is causing many officers to burn out and leave the work force (Papazoglou, Koskelainen, & Stuewe, 2018) which puts tremendous strain on many departments due to the continuing decline in new police recruits (Birch, Vickers, Kennedy, & Galovic, 2017). The increase in social media, video recording capabilities of cellphones, and the use of body cams by officers has led to more police encounters being recorded and made available to the public which in turn may be having a

negative effect on public perception/opinion of the police (Boivin, Gendron, Faubert, & Poulin, 2017). Specifically, the following research questions are investigated:

Research Question 1: How many officers working in small rural agencies that have been largely unimpacted by the recent civil unrest/riots that have occurred, as compared to agencies in large urban areas are either contemplating or have already decided to take early retirement or to leave the profession all together?

This hypothesis is proposed at a 95% confidence interval with a p-value of  $\leq 0.05$ . In the case that the p-value is  $< 0.05$  the null hypothesis will be rejected.

**H<sub>0</sub>1.** There is no statistical difference with early retirement between rural and urban police agencies.

**H<sub>a</sub>1.** There is statistically significant difference with early retirement between rural and urban agencies.

Research Question 2: How does the percentage of officers suffering from burnout or compassion fatigue differ between officers in rural and urban agencies?

This hypothesis is proposed at a 95% confidence interval with a p-value of  $\leq 0.05$ . In the case that the p-value is  $< 0.05$  the null hypothesis will be rejected.

**H<sub>0</sub>2.** There is no statistical difference with burnout between rural and urban police agencies.

**H<sub>a</sub>2.** There is statistically significant difference with burnout between rural and urban agencies.

Research Question 3: Of those officers who are contemplating early retirement or leaving the profession, what are the driving factors behind these decisions, particularly how much of a role does the media and political rhetoric play in these decisions?

Research Question 4: As it relates to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory, how do officers describe the impact that media coverage and political rhetoric is having on the amount of support officers receive from their agencies and the public/communities that they serve?

Research Question 5: How is media coverage and political rhetoric impacting officer views on their overall safety and their ability to effectively do their job?

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

This study began with certain assumptions made. One assumption is that the exact reason as to why some officers leave the profession will not be known due to an officer's desire to keep many things private, such as legal or private matters, and thus some officers do not provide a reason for their departure. A second assumption is that many officers may be skeptical about providing information about their career choices, decision-making, and are reluctant to discuss personal feelings due to the traditional view among police that discussing feelings is a sign of weakness.

The study also has some limitations. The first limitation has to do with the limited geographic area studied. The study will examine law enforcement at city and county levels in western and central North Carolina, which will limit its generalization to a wider geographical area. While this research will have a tremendous relevance for areas near the study area, the study will only serve as a case study within the already established literary knowledge. The second limitation is that some agencies/officers will not choose to participate in the study. By not participating, the chance to gain a complete picture of the geographic area being studied may be impacted.

### **Definitions**

**Burnout:** Burnout is associated with feelings of hopelessness and difficulty with job performance. It often stems from heavy workloads, feelings of ineffectiveness at work, and long work hours that do not allow officers time to recover (Rabenu & Aharoni-Goldenberg, 2017).

**Compassion fatigue:** Compassion fatigue is made up of two distinct parts. Part one refers to issues such as exhaustion, frustration, and depression. The second part is secondary traumatic stress which is a negative feeling driven by fear and work-related trauma. It can also be defined as the negative aspect of helping those who experience trauma (Stamm, 2010).

**Stress:** Officers are often exposed to not only normal stressors during the performance of their duties, but they are often faced with traumatic events and situations that can lead to secondary traumatic stress (STS) symptoms. Symptoms include avoidance, intrusion, hyper-arousal, and other symptoms similar to post traumatic stress disorder (Kunst, Saan, Bollen, & Kuijpers, 2016).

**Trauma:** Trauma can occur through several different means. It can be physical trauma experienced due to an attack by an armed suspect, vehicle accident, or other physical injury. It can also manifest as emotional trauma due to exposure to extremely violent crime scenes or incidents involving some type of traumatic event. This trauma can result in psychological issues that lead to early retirement, outright leaving the profession, or in very serious cases it can lead to an officer committing suicide (Leppma et al., 2018).

**Retirement:** In most states an officer must work a certain number of years, normally thirty, before they can officially retire. However, many states have enacted early retirement policies to allow police officers to retire with less than thirty years of work. Many officers are forced to take early retirement due to medical issues including physical injury, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Price, 2017) and other types of mental health issues (Galovski, Peterson, Beagley, Strasshofer, Held & Fletcher, 2016).

**Recruitment:** Recruitment refers to an agency's efforts to encourage new officers to apply for positions within their agency. Many agencies actively recruit more officers while federal agencies do not seem to actively recruit their officers (Yu, 2018).

**Public opinion:** Public opinion is defined as the beliefs, opinions or attitudes held by the public about the police. These opinions can be positive, negative, or neutral and can be influenced by a person's race, religion, level of education and social status (Carter, Corra, & Okorie, 2019).

**Media:** Media can mean any news story that appears on television news, an internet news site, or in a newspaper or magazine (Fridkin, Wintersieck, Courey, & Thompson, 2017).

**Social Media:** Social media refers to any social networking site such as Facebook, Twitter, or any other similar platform (Fridkin, et. al., 2017).

### Summary

Law enforcement plays a significant role in modern society and those that enter into and work in this profession should be applauded and encouraged. Unfortunately, law enforcement today is under intense public and political pressure due to a few highly publicized instances of police involved shootings. Across the nation a trend is emerging where officers are leaving the profession at an increased rate through retirement, early retirement, medical retirement, or simply leaving the job (Papazoglou, Koskelainen, & Stuewe, 2018). At the same time that officers are choosing to leave the profession at an increased rate, agencies are seeing fewer applicants and individuals who are wanting, or willing, to become police officers (Birch, et.al., 2017). It is of tremendous importance that we determine how this phenomenon is affecting small rural law enforcement agencies, what are the forces driving officers from the profession, and how these trends can be addressed. In its simplest terms, the desire to help agencies adapt to the

current climate is the true goal of this study. The results of this study, and studies like it, will benefit law enforcement agencies, current and future law enforcement officers, the communities that agencies serve, and ultimately our society as a whole.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview

Policing is often seen as a paradox between two different realities. One reality is a sedentary environment consisting of long periods of inactivity and the other is an environment of life and death situations that call for extreme physical exertion (Williams & Ramsey, 2017). The transition between these two realities often occurs in just seconds. Factually there is overwhelming evidence of law enforcement being a dangerous profession in which several officers are killed each year. Anecdotally there is also evidence to show that law enforcement is an even more dangerous profession in today's society. The number of officers working in the field across the country has been in decline for the past several years (Gibbs, Lee & Bachnak, 2018). Regardless of whether this increased danger is fact or just perception, we must determine if this is influencing officers to leave the profession. Even if the job is no more dangerous today than it has been in the past, if officers believe that it is more dangerous and are leaving law enforcement earlier, what role the media playing in pushing and/or creating this perception must be established. There exists substantial evidence that the media's coverage of law enforcement, particularly when dealing with the presentation of police use of force videos, plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion of law enforcement (Boivin, Gendron, Faubert, & Poulin, 2017). Campbell and Valera (2020) also demonstrated how instances of police use of force and how they were portrayed on social media substantially impacted younger individuals' opinion of the police. However, little has been done to determine the impact media has on law enforcement's opinion of their profession or their perception of how the public view and support them. The focus of this study is to explore the opinions of law enforcement officers, determine if



and why they are contemplating leaving the profession, and determine what role the media and political rhetoric is playing in these opinions.

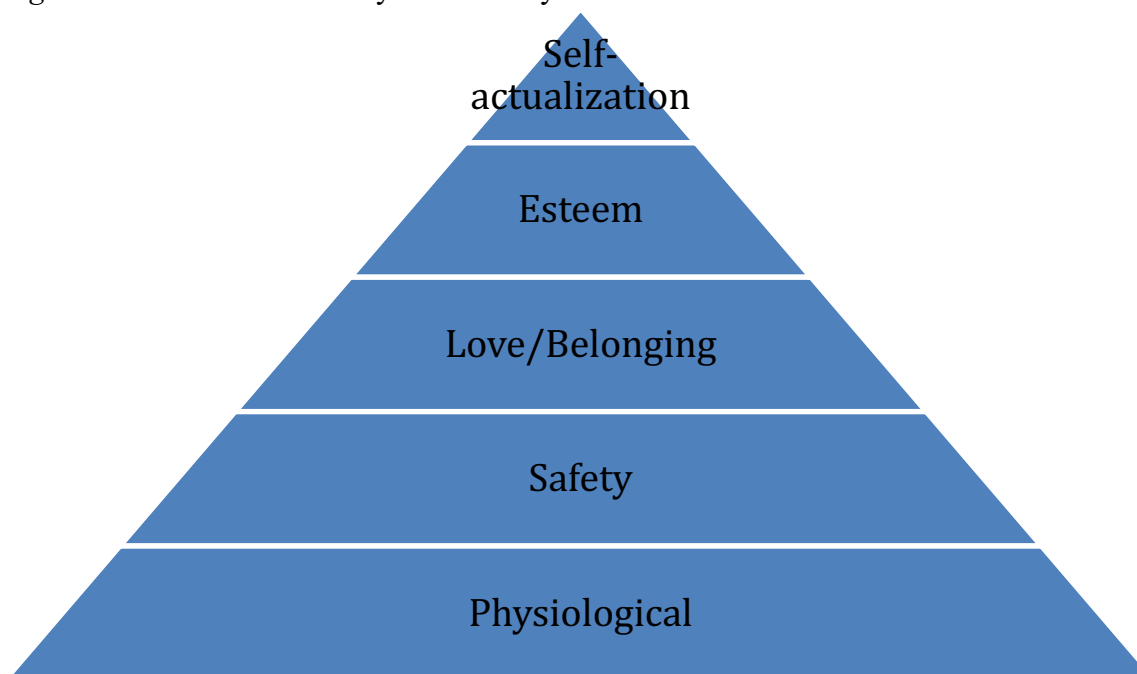
Research for this study focused on examining peer reviewed literature from online databases of academic journals that covered topics such as criminal justice, law enforcement, psychology, occupational science, communication, media, health science and various other subjects. The scholarly research reviewed pertained predominately to law enforcement officers only but also included articles dealing with correctional officers and other professions closely linked to law enforcement. Other resources used include sources such as the U.S. Department of Labor, North Carolina Department of Justice, and various other sources of statistics. Some areas of study have an extensive amount of literature already compiled while other areas had very little prior research conducted.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory has primarily been applied to the area of business and the impact that management style has on employee job satisfaction, happiness, and motivation (Stewart, Nodoushani, & Stumpf, 2018). Maslow's theory consists of three core claims about a human's fundamental needs. The first claim is that a person's needs can be arranged hierarchically, starting with basic physical needs such as food and shelter, then increasing to self-esteem and self-actualization (*Figure 1*). Second, as a person moves up the hierarchy they acquire new needs. Finally, motivating people only occurs when appealing to their unsatisfied needs (Lussier, 2019). When Maslow proposed his theory in 1943 it was considered a revolutionary idea in that it challenged the prevailing belief that humans only had a small number of basic drives such as hunger and thirst, and all social drives were secondary (Kenrick, 2017). Maslow's new theory suggested that a person's driving factors and resulting

needs change over time through the course of their lives. However, Maslow's theory was also seen as taking a common-sense view of human nature in that regardless of the situation, a person's most basic needs, such as food, shelter, and safety must be met for the person to become motivated to try and advance in their chosen profession (Bridgman, Cummings, & Ballard, 2019).

*Figure 1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Pyramid*



In the field of law enforcement, Maslow's theory is applicable and can still have a major impact. However, rather than looking at the law enforcement working environment from Maslow's traditional progression of needs culminating with self-esteem and self-actualization, these two areas of need are not typically provided by the agency but rather are qualities that the majority of officers possess the day they join the force. Research has identified basic police officer personality traits that allow officers to be open to new experiences and adapt to newfound challenges as compared to other personality types (Masood, Rafique, Qaisar, & Musarat, 2017). This type of personality also makes it possible for officers to more easily adapt and to cope with

continued exposure to the stresses and trauma of working in law enforcement (Arble, Daugherty, & Arnetz, 2017). Generally speaking, police officers are found to be psychologically healthy and stable throughout their careers (Wills & Schuldberg, 2016). This could be seen as a product of officers already possessing high self-esteem and self-actualization prior to becoming a law enforcement officer. Police work, in and of itself regardless of the employing agency, allows officers to exercise a great deal of discretion in how they handle certain situations (Glazener, Kozlowski, Lynch & Smith, 2019). This use of discretion allows officers to be creative in their problem-solving ability which is one of the hallmarks of Maslow's self-actualization level of needs. Officers encounter numerous situations where discretion is necessary, and some would even go so far as to say that discretion is one of the most valuable tools that an officer possesses (Buvik, 2016). However, many agencies have begun to implement policies to limit officer discretion. These policies have been shown to improve decision making among officers, as it pertains to use of force incidents, but has also been shown to reduce officer job satisfaction (Terrill & Paoline, 2017) which could be the result of officers feeling that their ability to be creative in problem-solving is being limited.

In the context of the current study, the levels of Maslow's theory that are of primary concern are levels two, safety, and level three, belonging. Officer safety is of primary concern for agencies across the country. The traditional approach to ensuring officer safety has focused primarily on body armor, improved equipment, and increased tactical training (Williot & Blanchette, 2020). The physical and emotional dangers that officers confront daily are out of the control of law enforcement agencies to a large extent. The typical dangers that are associated with work in law enforcement are accepted by those who choose to work as law enforcement officers. In terms of Maslow's third level of need, belonging, law enforcement is well known for

having its own culture and is often referred to as being a brotherhood. The close ties that develop between officers and the sense of belonging that officers have about the profession permeate throughout law enforcement at all levels (Constantinou & Butorac, 2019). This concept of brotherhood is one of the many attributes that make law enforcement a unique profession and one that lead many officers to remain in the profession.

The current study takes the principles of safety, belonging and support that Maslow theorized as critical needs of workers, and analyzes how these needs are being impacted by recent and current media coverage of law enforcement throughout the country. Law enforcement is not a traditional profession when viewing it from a traditional business standpoint. Law enforcement agencies are not the only entity that plays a role in taking care of an officer's various needs as defined within Maslow's theory. In the realm of law enforcement, the citizens and communities in which officers serve also play a tremendous role in satisfying these needs. The need for community support of law enforcement, and the benefits of this support, are key reasons for the increased implementation of community policing programs and community relation officers across the country (Shupard & Kearns, 2019). Public support of law enforcement is critical in allowing officers to do their jobs safely and efficiently (Ferdik, Gist, & Blasco, 2016). A great deal of research has been done that shows individuals get most of their information about crime, the police, and the justice system from the media and that this media consumption directly helps to shape individual attitudes and perceptions about these topics (Intravia, Wolff, & Piquero, 2018). The present study aims to address the lack of research about how the same media coverage that helps to shape public opinion of law enforcement is affecting law enforcement officers' opinion on how the public view law enforcement officers and how much officers believe the public supports them. In addition, it is also important to determine if

officers believe that media coverage is causing the job of law enforcement to become more dangerous and how these perceptions are leading to officers leaving the profession.

### **Related Literature**

Law enforcement is a unique and complex profession. While the current study covers important issues and an area that prior research has largely left untouched, it is important to review topics such as the dangers of police work, the current trends in violence against officers, the rate at which officers are leaving the profession as compared to new officers entering the field, the impact that media has on public opinion, and what steps agencies and officers are taking to help combat the current media narrative in order to demonstrate the importance and need for this study.

### **A Dangerous Occupation**

Anyone who currently works, or has worked, in law enforcement will agree that there is a tremendous amount of stress involved in the job. Police work is often stressful in almost every aspect of the job. Each day officers respond to situations that range from relatively minor calls for service to incidents that are physically dangerous or life threatening to the officer (Jetelina, et al., 2020). Police officers also must face the fact that they may become the victim of a targeted attack against law enforcement. After several years of decline, the number of violent attacks against police officers has been on an upward trajectory since 2016 (Schouten & Brennan, 2016). The most frequent stressor that officers identify is responding to family disputes, while exposure to battered and abused children is the highest rated stressor (Violanti et al., 2016). Whereas law enforcement has many unique stressors such as dealing with armed individuals, pursuits and first-hand exposure to traumatic events, it also shares many stressors that are common to other professions such as shift work, excessive overtime, and workload (Korre, Farioli, Varvarigou,

Sato, & Kales, 2014). However, many of the situations that police officers are faced with are beyond the imagination of many who have never been exposed to various forms of trauma that officers experience. Repeated exposure to traumatic events can inflict trauma on those who witness these types of scenes. This phenomenon is referred to as secondary traumatic stress, which many police officers fall victim (Kunst, Saan, Bollen, & Kuijpers, 2017).

Police officers are not immune from the stress that they experience despite their training and their tendency to show little emotion to difficult stimuli. Many times, those in society view traumatic occurrences and disasters through their television, phone, or computer and marvel at how bad something must be for those involved but give very little concern to those who are having to deal with the tragedy in real life, at least where first responders are concerned. As Kunst et al. (2017) point out, secondary traumatic stress has several visible manifestations for those who experience it. While certain character traits that are common among police officers and previous officer experiences, such as military service, may allow an officer to better deal with stressors encountered in the field (Jetelina, et al., 2020), many officers still manifest various conditions that are stress related. One such manifestation is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In recent years the number of officers who have been diagnosed as suffering with PTSD has increased dramatically (Leppma et al, 2018). Health issues such as high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, depression and anti-social behaviors are also highly prevalent among police officers (Korre et al., 2014). Sadly, these stressors that contribute to many physical and psychological issues that officers suffer from also place police officers at a higher risk of suicide. Many of the traumatic events and situations that officers have to witness during their careers can cause some officers to become depressed which causes feeling of hopelessness that unfortunately lead some officers to commit suicide (Violanti et al, 2016). The increased risk of suicide among

police officers is not just a United States phenomenon. Canadian officials also report that the suicide rate among emergency services personnel, including police officers, is increasing at an alarming rate (Koopmans, Wagner, Schmidt, & Harder, 2017). It is clear that the job of law enforcement can take a heavy toll physically, emotionally and mentally on those working in the field.

One of the most obvious dangers that officers face is being the victim of physical assault and assault by deadly weapons. The majority of these assaults are unplanned and often occur when a suspect is resisting arrest (Schouten & Brennan, 2016). A popular belief among officers, and even the public, is that officers are most at risk of being the victim of an assault while conducting a *routine* traffic stop. Woods (2016) was able to show that the rate of an officer fatality during a traffic stop was 1 in every 6.5 million stops and 1 in every 361,000 stops resulting in serious injury to an officer. The overall fatality rate for patrol officers in the United States is approximately 15 to 16 per 100,000 full time officers (Mona, Chimbari, & Hongoro, 2019). One interesting development in terms of the number of officers being assaulted has to do with officers who wear body worn cameras, which will be discussed in more detail shortly. Many agencies have begun to use body worn cameras (BWCs) to discourage police misconduct and also to serve as evidence should a complaint of excessive force or abuse arise. A recent study showed that officers who wear a BWC are 37% more likely to be assaulted than those who do not (Ariel, et al., 2018). However, recent statistics have shown a general decline in acts of lethal violence directed at law enforcement officers, but it is unclear if there is an emerging pattern of increased targeted attacks being conducted (Schouten & Brennan, 2016). Bejan, Hickman, Parkin and Pozo (2018) was unable to show any such increase in retaliatory violence against law enforcement officers but that there does exist a strong belief that police are under attack and are

facing a higher level of danger than they were in the past. Schouten & Brennan (2016) note that 58% of the American public believed the narrative that there was a *war on police* back in 2015 which is five years prior to the recent anti-police riots and demonstrations that took place during the summer of 2020.

### **Recruitment and Retention**

The total number of full-time police officers in the United States has increased by approximately 52,000 between 1997 and 2016 which is an 8% increase. However, during the same span the total US population increased by 21% which is about 56 million people. This results in a net decrease of 11% (US DOJ, 2018). In other words, even though there may be more total officers working today, the rate at which officers are hired is not keeping up with the rate at which the population increases. The reason for this is ultimately two-fold. The first issue is that officers are leaving the profession faster than new officers can be hired and trained. A prime example can be found within the New York City Police Department where officer filings for retirement surged 411% between June 29 and July 6, 2020 (CNN, 2020). This is not only an American phenomenon. One example is Sweden who has also seen a sizeable increase in the number of officers leaving the profession with an increase of 450% over a five-year period of officers leaving for reasons other than retirement (Andersson, Larsen, & Ramstrand, 2017). The second issue is that the overall rate of new police officer applications has dropped tremendously in the past several years. Some agencies have reported over a 50% decline in the number of new applications for police positions (Jackson & Lee, 2018).

Law enforcement agencies are always having to deal with turnover. Officers are constantly being hired, leaving for other agencies, quitting, and retiring. The problem, as mentioned earlier, is that the number of officers in the U.S. is declining and the number of



applicants for police positions could be seen as plummeting. Across the nation police agencies have seen the number of new applicants drop by 50% or more, and if that is not bad enough, of those new officers upwards of 29% of them leave their position in less than a year (Jackman, 2018). Colleges and universities are being used to increase the number of applicants applying for police work with marketing to students studying criminal justice or criminology. Still, of those who are studying criminal justice or criminology, not all want to pursue a career in police work and for those that do, the earning of a degree has little to no effect on how an agency evaluates potential applicants (Huey, Peladeau, & Kalyal, 2018). Agencies also continue to recruit through traditional means such as fliers, posts in classified ads, and recruiting posts on social media or on department web pages but with little results to show for it. Recruitment strategies that focus on the public service of the job for motivation have shown to be rather ineffective whereas messages that focus on the personal benefits of the job such as emphasizing the challenge of the job or the career benefits, are three times as effective as traditional means (Linos, 2018).

Police academies are also facing multiple issues and are having to change their normal way of doing things to confront these issues. The most glaring issue, as previously discussed, is the decreasing number of new applicants entering the field. Another issue is trying to get as many students as possible to successfully complete training in order to help fill the numerous vacancies that agencies currently have. One idea that is being explored is the idea of smaller academy class sizes. While this idea seems counter intuitive in that smaller classes means fewer new officers, the reality is that studies have shown that smaller class sizes often result in higher pass rates and lower instances of misconduct during and post-academy (Gonzalez, Bishopp, & Jetelina, 2015). Academies are also recruiting minorities and females at a higher rate than in the past (Nevers, 2019). The reasons for this diverse recruitment are to not only increase the number

of new officers entering the profession, but to also combat some of the negative images and stereotypes that the public has about law enforcement in general (Blumberg, Scholsser, Papazoglou, Creighton, & Kaye, 2019). In fact, combating the stereotypes and misconceptions about the police is the main force driving the current changes being implemented in police academies across the nation (Sargeant, Antrobus, & Platz, 2017), which will be discussed in greater detail later.

As discussed in the previous section, police work is a very stressful profession with personal, organizational, and operational stressors. These stressors are often a driving force in an officer's choice to leave the profession. One result of these stressors is what is referred to as burnout. Burnout among officers, as well as other related professions, may manifest as depression, anxiety, sleep disturbance, memory impairment, and even psychosomatic issues (Papazoglou, Koskelainen, & Stuewe, 2018). Several factors contribute to burnout such as shift work, workload, exposure to traumatic events, support levels, and feelings of hopelessness stemming from not seeing that the officer's actions make any sort of positive impact. Studies have shown that one of the major factors relating to burnout is increased overtime hours worked by officers. Not only are extended hours taxing mentally, but longer hours also place great physical strain on the body in that the more hours worked result in fewer hours to rest and recharge, which make officers more prone to burnout (Rabenu & Aharoni-Goldenberg, 2017). The physical strain that the body endures can lead to health problems such as hypertension and degenerative disorders of the spine (Krzeminski & Florkowski, 2018). Digestive issues such as stomach ulcers have also been identified as chronic health issues associated with public safety workers such as police and firefighters (Lin, Wang, Shih, Kuo, & Liang, 2019).

While physical health issues such as heart disease and traumatic injury have cut many law enforcement careers short, mental injuries have claimed numerous careers as well. Law enforcement officers across the country have been applying for disability and early retirement due to stress-related psychiatric conditions at an increased rate (Price, 2017). The leading psychiatric conditions cited are PTSD, suicidal thoughts, and alcohol abuse (Price, 2017) with PTSD accounting for the majority of cases. PTSD can be the product of years of being exposed to violent or emotionally traumatic scenes or it can stem from one particular incident such as the attacks of 9/11 or the Boston Marathon bombings. While the number of cases of PTSD usually spike after a large tragedy, in the case of the Boston Marathon bombings there was not a drastic increase of reported cases due in large part to the pro-active counselling and treatment options given to first responders (Beinecke, 2014). Unfortunately, the response to the Boston Marathon bombings serves as the exception to the rule when it comes to assisting officers deal with trauma. Many officers witness horrifying scenes or are involved in life threatening situations where they are injured or may have been forced to use deadly force against another person, but do not receive any sort of assistance. Sometimes this may be the product of an agency not understanding the need or not having the resources to assist even though clear evidence exists that show that officers with PTSD can benefit tremendously from therapy and treatment (Smid, van der Meer, Olf, & Nijdam, 2018). However, many times it boils down to the law enforcement culture or mindset. Many officers are hesitant to admit to having mental health issues because they fear that doing so could be career destroying. This fear added to the overall cynical view that most police officers have about mental illness (Bell & Eski, 2016) results in an environment that discourages officers to seek help for mental illness. The resistance to mental

health assistance prevents early intervention, which can lead to an increase in officers leaving the field due to PTSD or other issues.

The amount of, or level of, support that officers receive directly impacts their job satisfaction and even their psychological/mental well-being. Socio-psychological research has become one of the most relevant topics in job satisfaction research today (Pakhol, 2020). Job satisfaction is one of the primary factors that determine whether an employee remains with an employer or seeks other employment regardless of profession (Chakravarti & Chakraborty, 2020). Law enforcement is well known for being a very high-stress profession and thus officers require a higher level of support from their supervisors, agencies and even the communities that they serve. Andersson, Larsen, and Ramstrand (2017) the prolonged stress inherent in law enforcement requires agencies to provide increased support to help minimize the level of physical and mental fatigue felt by officers. However, most initiatives enacted by law enforcement agencies are devoted to tangible outcomes of police work such as arrests and crime prevention rather than intangible issues such as physical and mental well-being (Holienkova, 2018). Given the nature of work in the law enforcement field, police officers require a high level of trust in their fellow officers as well as command staff. Officers surveyed who reported having low levels of trust in their supervisors also report a very low level of job satisfaction whereas officers who have a high degree of trust in their supervisors report a much higher level of job satisfaction (Tomazevic & Aristovnik, 2019). In terms of the profession itself, law enforcement officers often report a much higher level of job anxiety and lower levels of life satisfaction than do many other professions (Agrahari & Kotnala, 2018). Support and trust are crucial elements in helping officers deal with these issues and when these two factors are either weak or non-existent, officers report feeling a loss of camaraderie and fidelity which results in officers

becoming detached and increases their likelihood of leaving the profession (Parnaby & Weston, 2020).

Another factor that can impact an officer's job satisfaction, and is of particular concern of the present study, is how they are treated over time by those that they serve. Law enforcement can be seen as a service-based industry and as a result there is a customer service aspect. Retail workers often report that customer interaction is one of the most satisfying as well one of the most stressful aspects of their jobs (Coletto & Fullin, 2018). These employees point to situations where they must deal with angry or irate customers as being the most stressful and that in many cases the customer's anger had nothing to do with the employee specifically, but rather was a result of some policy or decision of business management (DeCelles, DeVoe, Rafaeli, & Agasi, 2019). These types of situations are not uncommon for law enforcement officers and officers must deal with these events on an almost daily basis. Much like the situations reported by retail workers, the situations encountered by officers are also quite often due to an individual's response to a law or policy that is out of the officer's hands and not directly the fault of the officer involved (Lee, 2015). Over the course of a career, an officer will encounter countless situations where they deal with angry or upset people who verbally berate and/or harass an officer even if the officer is not responsible for the situation at hand. These types of situations can be classified as *verbal aggression* and can have a cumulative effect on an officer's psychological health much like physical assaults can impact an officer's physical health. In a longitudinal study, it was found that repeated exposure to instances of verbal aggression increased the level of job dissatisfaction as well as increasing the likelihood of verbal retaliation from the employee (Andel, Pindek, & Spector, 2019). It stands to reason that a person who is verbally abused by those that they serve will eventually become dissatisfied with their job and

are more likely to leave that job, regardless of profession. Law enforcement officers are even more likely to suffer from these types of encounters given the nature of their job and the numerous and varied interactions that officers have with the public.

### **Public Opinion**

The saying is that you never get a second chance to make a first impression and in the world of police that is still the case. Many people's opinions about the entire criminal justice system are based on their opinion of the police and many people's opinion of the police stems from their first interaction with a police officer which usually occurs when that person is a juvenile. These early encounters shape the way juveniles see the police in terms of authority, attitude, fairness and possible prejudice (Brunson & Pegram, 2018). During this first-time officer-juvenile encounter, if an officer displays any negative quality such as racial profiling or racial discrimination while dealing with a juvenile, then that juvenile will believe that all officers are that way and will paint all police with a wide brush. If an officer does have a negative interaction with a juvenile, or anyone for that matter, it does not mean that that person's opinion will forever be the same. People can change and so can their attitudes. One problem that has been identified with public perception of the police is that in many cases police departments are unable to effectively communicate with the population that they serve (Bain, Robinson, & Conser, 2014). Agencies that are able to effectively communicate with the populace about what they are doing and the reasons they are doing it, enjoy a more positive perception than agencies that fail to communicate.

Perhaps the most common theme found when researching public opinion about the police was the amount, or the perceived amount, of racism inherent in those who serve as police officers. In terms of race and opinion of the police, black individuals, especially black males, are

more likely to view the police negatively than someone who is white or Latino (Nadal et al., 2017). The majority of police officers in the United States are white which does little to dispel the notion that law enforcement is a racist institution, despite increased recruitment of minority officers (Ray, Ortiz, & Nash, 2017). According to the U.S. Department of Justice 72.8% of full-time sworn police officers in United States are white, and of those officers 87.8% are male (Gibbs, Lee, & Bachnak, 2020). Statistics like this does little to dispel the notion that law enforcement is led by white males and is discriminatory towards people of color. Furthermore, instances such as those that took place in Ferguson, Missouri, and Minneapolis, Minnesota, only serve to add fuel to the negative opinion of police held by minority individuals. While these events seem to reinforce the notion of the police as racists to some, it often boils down to a misunderstanding between culture, legal knowledge, and human behavior (Wade, 2017).

Events such as Ferguson, Missouri, not only further the notion that police officers are racist, but they also convey the image that police officers are murdering minority individuals, especially black males, at an alarming rate. Black individuals make up approximately 15% of the U.S. population but constitute 40% of the suspects who are shot and killed by police officers, and data from the U.S. Department of Justice show that, per capita, police are approximately five times more likely to shoot a black suspect than a white suspect (Scott, Ma, Sadler, & Correll, 2017). Statistics from the National Violent Death Reporting System showed that deaths of black individuals as a result of use of force by law enforcement were 2.8 times higher than whites and have a four-fold higher rate of legal intervention deaths for black males than white males (Buehler, 2017). Looking strictly at the numbers, it appears to be a proven theory that the police are merely a group of professional racists who hunt down and murder black males, but this is not necessarily what these numbers really mean. Looking at life expectancy and life outcomes

overall for African American men, we see that they have some of the poorest life expectancy and quality of life outcomes of any other racial or ethnic group. The age-adjusted death rates for black males is 1,052 out of 100,000 population compared to 639 for Hispanic males, and 876 for white males (Staggers-Hakim, 2016). The CDC Vital Statistics Report lists homicide as the leading cause of death for African American males ages 15-39 (Staggers-Hakim, 2016) with the majority of the homicides committed by other African American males (Buehler, 2017) even though those committed by law enforcement garner the most attention. Scott et al. (2017) goes on to point out that if each case in which a minority was killed by a police officer were to be examined more closely to account for the different context of the encounters, the amount of training the officer had, officer characteristics and neighborhood characteristics, a different picture is shown. However, most people do not delve into the statistics that deeply and thus use the raw data to inform their opinions.

Considering that most of negative opinions stem from the perception that law enforcement officers routinely engage in excessive force, as well as other forms of misconduct, it is important to determine just how often these events occur to determine if negative public opinions are warranted and grounded in fact. As previously detailed, law enforcement is a dangerous profession and as a result officers are allowed and required to use force if the situation warrants. The overall test when it comes to judging whether force is legal or not is the test of reasonableness. In other words, law enforcement officers are allowed to use reasonable force in any given situation. Unfortunately, some officers may be more likely to use unreasonable, or excessive, force than other officers. Jetelina, et al. (2020) was able to demonstrate that officers that are routinely exposed to high stress calls such as domestic assaults, abused children and other acute crisis situations are more likely to experience *adverse events* that result in the use of



excessive force. Nemeth (2019) argues that the concept of qualified immunity for police officers increases the chances of officers using excessive force by providing officers with legal cover to commit such acts. A popular belief is that police target and have contact with racial minorities at a much higher level than they do with white individuals. According to official Bureau of Justice Statistics in 2018 24% of the population had contact with law enforcement officers and of those contacts 26% were white and only 21% were black (Harrell & Davis, 2020). In terms of police use of force the International Association of Chiefs of Police estimated the officer use of force rate at just 3.61 per 10,000 service calls (Blumberg, Schlosser, Papazoglou, Creighton, & Kaye, 2019). However, determining the prevalence of police use of force, and excessive force, cannot be done with any degree of precision as no clear database exists that tracks such events. A 2018 report by the United States Commission on Civil Rights investigated the issue of police use of force. In the report summary delivered to President Trump, it stated that “accurate and comprehensive data regarding police uses of force is generally not available to police departments or the American public.” The Commission went on to recommend a national database be established to collect and analyze data about instances of police use of force (USCCR, 2018). Without concrete data about police use of force, the public is left to form their opinions based solely on what they see on television or read in the newspaper or online.

### **Role of the Media**

When our founding fathers created the Bill of Rights freedom of the press was listed in the very first of these amendments. They knew that a free press was a powerful tool for the citizens to be able to know what their government was doing and to stay informed about events that transpire. While freedom of the press can be a powerful tool and benefit for the citizens of a free country, that same press can be used to manipulate public opinion as well as help to push a

certain political agenda. The power of the press is not just unique to the United States. Studies about public opinion and the impact that the press had on these opinions in England and the issue of “Brexit” showed that media coverage not only had a tremendous impact on public opinion, but it also led to increased polarization on the issue (Wajcieszak, Azrout, & Vreese, 2018). In Sweden media coverage was shown to have little impact on the percentage of people who were informed of certain policy implementations, but of those that were informed via the media, the way that the media covered the policy to be implemented had a direct impact on the opinions of those people on the policy in question (Fredriksson, Tiainen, & Hanning, 2015).

The media is an important aspect of modern life and is used for several purposes. The media can be broken down into four main categories: print, radio, television, and social. Each of these forms of media have various sub-categories and each can be used in numerous ways. One of the most common uses of all sources of media is the advertisement of products. Product manufacturers, politicians, political groups, restaurants, and countless other entities use each of these types of media to promote and advertise their particular product, service, or message. As the types of media have evolved over time they have allowed a wider audience to consume the messages conveyed. Television was once thought of as the media that has the greatest reach and the most influence, but the rise of social media has begun to challenge this notion and is proving to be a powerful tool to reach new and younger audiences (Stipp, 2016). Advertisers are learning that using social media and social media influencers to advertise their products is in some cases more effective and cost friendly than television advertisements (Jarrar, Awobamise, & Aderibigbe, 2020). In many cases the advertising campaign and advertising design are more critical to the success of the product advertised than the quality, cost, or appearance of the product (Stipp, 2016).

News media of all types, especially online sources, have allowed people to have a wide variety of places to get news and information. However, the increased number of news sources has also created an environment that allows for false, biased and/or misleading information to spread unchecked. Over the past several years there has been a growing divide between what is known as the *mainstream* media and alternative forms of news media. This divide became even more apparent during the 2016 presidential race when Donald Trump referred to the majority of the mainstream media as *fake news*. It is a long-held belief that news coverage and how certain topics are framed have great influence on voter opinions and voting habits, but a large portion of Americans do not believe that the mainstream media covers the majority of the important issues (Newton, 2019). As a result, more and more people are switching to online news sources. More than 60% of Americans are online news consumers and 25% of internet users have posted a comment to an online news article (Schwartz, Yahav, & Silverman, 2017). As pointed out, these new online alternatives to traditional news sources allow for false, biased, and unfounded information to spread. In addition, large tech companies such as Google, YouTube, Facebook, and others have a great amount of power and influence over what news sources and stories are given the most attention. In recent years online big technology companies such as Google and social media companies such as Facebook have begun receiving criticisms and accusations that they are engaged in active censorship of certain stories and/or viewpoints, stifling free speech and not allowing opposing viewpoints to receive the same amount of coverage (Schwartz, Yahav, & Silverman, 2017). Stanley and Lawson (2020) cite these issues as reasons that critical thinking and media literacy are crucially important so that individuals, particularly young individuals, can critically evaluate news stories to determine if any bias exists and to encourage them to do extra research on a story rather than just relying on a single news headline. Stanley

and Lawson (2020) go on to state that most Americans have become increasingly dependent upon the media and rarely delve deeply into a topic but rather depend on the media outlet's summary to guide their opinion and thought process.

When it comes to the United States and the public's opinion of the police, particularly as it pertains to juveniles, the influence of the media is shown to be one of the largest influencing factors, second only to their peer group opinion (Romain & Hassell, 2014). In terms of adults, research shows that media coverage greatly impacts public opinion, the setting of political agendas, and pushing for social change (Hanitzsch, Hanusch, & Lauerer, 2016). The way that the media covers, or frames, a certain issue greatly determines the impact that it has on public opinion. We live in a world today where everything is either photographed or caught on video, and police-citizen interactions are no exception. It appears that each day provides a new piece of bodycam footage showing an officer using force on an individual. Some videos, as with the case of bodycam footage, are meant to justify why an officer needed to use force but the way that the media frames the footage has a definite effect on how the video is received. This steady stream of police videos has resulted in a significant impact on the opinions the public has about the use of force and an incorrect assumption of how often police use force (Boivin, Gendron, Faubert, & Poulin, 2017). These videos are often presented with little to no context or framed in a negative context prior to presentation. This lack of background coupled with many people's lack of legal knowledge leads to increased emotions and, as we have seen more and more of recently, social unrest (Wade, 2017). Furthermore, the way in which the video is framed has an effect on public perception and opinion. Those videos that show a white police officer using force against a minority suspect, usually African-American, are often framed in the context of white vs. black instead of trying to explain the circumstances surrounding the incident. A study by Fridkin,

Wintersieck, Courey, and Thompson (2017) used a police video depicting a white police officer used force against a black female. The same video was shown to two groups. One group was presented the video in the context of possible police brutality while the other group was presented the video in the context of law and order. The results showed that those who had the video presented as police brutality reported that the video showed the police to be racist, while the other group showed more support for the officer. Holbrook and Kisamore (2018) echo these findings in their study in which media clips were presented to separate groups with the clips presented with both negative and positive slants then administering a survey to group participants. The participants who viewed the negatively slanted clips reported a slightly higher rate of negative feedback than those who viewed the positively slanted clips.

Jeong, Yum, and Hwang (2018) identified three different attributions, or levels of focus, made by the media: individualistic, societal, and neutral. They discovered that media stories focused on an individual level, such as lack of self-control or individual responsibility, and neutral levels had little impact on a person's opinions or assignment of responsibility. However, those issues framed at a societal level had a greater impact on an individual's opinion which is believed to be the result of the individual seeing the presented issue as being larger and affecting more people. This framing of issues in a societal context is one reason that the media's coverage of law enforcement is so influential. Rather than presenting a story individually and determining whether the officer(s) involved acted incorrectly or illegally, the story is framed as an example of police culture and that these events are commonplace and symbolic of all officers. In today's society when an event occurs involving an officer and a use of force incident, not only is the individual officer criticized but law enforcement in general are all painted with the same broad brush. More and more the argument is being framed as law enforcement versus minorities, and

the police are an inherently violent and racist organization that instills this type of conduct in all officers during training (Lynch, 2018). The news media helps to perpetuate this notion in the way that they cover use of force incidents. Looking at events such as the Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson and the George Floyd death in Minnesota, it is clear to see how the news media are quick to cover the racial, white vs. black, aspect of these events. Dukes and Gaither (2017) point out the way that the media portrays the victims greatly impact public opinion about the event. They discovered that when the media withheld details about criminal records and prior criminal acts that public opinion would favor the victim rather than law enforcement, but when criminal record details were released public opinion became more favorable towards law enforcement.

The current media narrative being driven is that law enforcement violence is at epidemic levels and needs to be addressed. In 2018 the American Public Health Association released a statement recognizing law enforcement violence as a public health issue (Duarte, Alson, Garakani, Mitchell, & Chan, 2019). This idea of epidemic levels of police violence are further inflamed by politicians calling for needed action to curb this epidemic and to end the systemic racism that is alleged to be inherent in American policing. A perfect example was Rep. Rashida Tlaib, D-Michigan, who recently called for an end to policing in America because it is “intentionally racist” and eluded to policing being equated with “government funded murder” (Foxnews, 2021). Similar statements and opinions are even present in peer reviewed literature today. Patrick Radebe (2021) opens his article calling the death of George Floyd “an execution-style murder” and contends that law enforcement training academies instill racist anti-African American ideologies in police cadets. Radebe’s depiction of Mr. Floyd’s death is both inflammatory and premature considering the trial of the officers involved in that event have not

concluded yet and no legal assignment of guilt has been determined. Statements like this only fuel negative public opinion toward the police and news media outlets are more than happy to report about these types of statements in an attempt to increase ratings. In addition, these types of over-the-top criticisms and outlandish statements only further erode the level of trust that the public has in the police which makes it harder and harder for officers to do their jobs effectively (Kaariainen, Isotalus, & Thomassen, 2016).

It's not just the world of print and television media that affects public opinion. Social and online news media is a new and powerful medium in which many people get much of their news and information. Decades ago, Americans had to wait on their weekly or daily paper, listen to the radio at certain times, or tune into their local television news in order to read or learn about current events. Things started to change when networks such as CNN and Fox News began to run news broadcasts twenty-four hours a day. This allowed people to turn on the news at any point of the day and get caught up on the news of the day. Today, online news sources provide a powerful medium for news agencies to reach an even larger audience. While online news sources provide ease of access they also present problems. Roche, Pickett, and Gertz (2015) assert that online news media has a major impact on the public's perception about crime and how often crime actually occurs, and that online news media provides a powerful tool to spread and expose more people to political ideologies and agendas. When the media focuses on a certain type of crime and provides heavy coverage of that type of crime, the public often believes that that type of crime is occurring at a greater rate than what is actually occurring. Violent crime, for example, usually garners tremendous media attention and the news media typically devote greatly disproportionate coverage to the most extreme examples and often fail to provide context or information that would help moderate the public's fear of such instances (O'Hear, 2020). The

present portrayal of law enforcement use of force cases is another stunning example of this phenomenon. This type of media sensationalism has also been shown to impact the public's opinion on increased punishments for certain crimes, although it has been shown to impact whites more than African Americans or Hispanics (Simmons, 2017). The twenty-four-hour news media and online news media sources also allow those with a political bias or agenda to have numerous options in spreading their ideologies. In the past couple of years there has been an increased call for de-funding the police or at least a near complete overhaul of the entire policing system. News outlets on both the left and right side of the political spectrum have taken this idea and pushed it as either a woke forward thinking concept or to point out the severe flaws and dangers that this ideology poses to society. While both sides of the spectrum touch on the subject, more left leaning outlets seem to be pushing this narrative harder than those on the right and it is something that has not gone unnoticed by law enforcement officers. The majority of law enforcement officers believe that the news media provides predominately negative coverage of law enforcement and that this coverage has led to an active war on the police (Nix, Wolfe, & Campbell, 2018).

When it comes to social media a major problem is the likelihood of misinformation being spread with very few individuals checking the credibility of these stories or information before sending it on to more of their friends or using that faulty information as a basis for their opinion. Social media has become a favorite medium for those advocating for social justice. These social justice groups use social media to spread their message and push their political agendas by targeting a younger audience who are more apt to use social media and specifically targeting college students (Lane, Chiarelli-Helminiak, Bohrman, & Lewis, 2017) encouraging them to take part in political activism (Karamat & Farooq, 2016). In addition, social media sites have been



used to target and harass police officers and police agencies. The tactics used by some on social media sites have led to increased tensions between the police and the communities that they serve. One example can be found in Chicago where numerous young people took to Twitter to openly post their severe disdain for the Chicago Police Department and some even expressed a strong desire to violently attack the police as a response to a prior officer involved shooting where a young gang member was killed (Patton, et al., 2016). While some would see instances like this as political activism the fact is that social media posts such as this creates increased tension and stress levels for members of the community as well as members of the targeted agency (Hisam, et al., 2017). Furthermore, as individuals see more and more anti-police rhetoric posted on their Facebook timelines or Twitter feeds, and see an increasing number of negative stories about police brutality or inherent racism, it results in an individual accepting reality as being what they are seeing on their computer screens rather than objectively viewing the material and making their own determination (Ray & Kort-Butler, 2019).

### **Changing Perceptions and Officer Morale**

It's not just public opinion that is affected by media coverage. Police self-image is also affected by the coverage of these events. In a survey of 567 officers, a majority of those surveyed reported that negative media coverage resulted in the officer being less motivated to do their job due to fear of making a mistake and having that mistake reported on the news, in the paper, or posted online (Nix & Wolfe, 2017). Law enforcement agencies are also feeling pressure due to the way in which they are being portrayed in the media. Given the way in which mainstream media has negatively portrayed law enforcement in general (Fridkin, et al., 2017) and the increased criticism being posted online (Patton, et al., 2016), law enforcement agencies and officers are having to change the way they do their jobs and how they train in order to help

change public perception. One tactic that many agencies have employed is a concept called *de-policing* where officers use less proactive enforcement and make fewer arrests. This approach is fueled by an increased fear of legal liability and negative publicity. However, while trying to placate critics and avoid liability issues, this tactic has been blamed for the recent spike in homicides and increased rates of other types of crime (Rosenfeld & Wallman, 2019). Another side effect of this policy is that officers are growing increasingly reluctant to use force even when it is warranted potentially increasing the danger of officer injury or death (Nix, Wolfe, & Campbell, 2018). De-policing may also have a negative effect on community satisfaction with local police agencies. Police agencies that are more proactive in dealing with crime and engage the local communities at a higher level received greater approval and community satisfaction than agencies that distanced themselves from the community and were less proactive (Lytle & Bolger, 2017).

The main topic that is usually discussed when talking about needed police reform is in the area of law enforcement training. Throughout the nation new curriculums are being developed for basic recruit training as well as new in-service training for officers already in the field. It is abundantly clear that in today's political climate law enforcement training cannot simply focus on the law or skills such as firearms or defensive tactics. Academies today must employ new training to cover emotional intelligence, community-oriented policing, bias awareness, and communication skills (Blumbert, et al., 2019). Some argue that police recruits and veteran officers should both receive increased cultural training to help mediate any misconceptions or cultural biases that may exist (Sargeant, Antrobus, & Platz, 2017). Problem based learning (PBL), also known as scenario-based training, has become a common form of training in police agencies today. PBL focused training allows cadets to develop critical thinking

skills and field-based problem-solving skills, while at the same time requiring cadets to use required legal, administrative, policy, and cultural knowledge in a given training situation (Makin, 2016). By using various scenarios instructors can recreate situations that cadets are likely to face once in the field and allow the cadets to come up with their own solution rather than merely choosing what they think the best solution is from a given list of options. This also allows for instructors to evaluate and offer constructive feedback in what the cadet could do better, identify any mistakes, and give the cadet an opportunity to evaluate themselves and discuss any thoughts or feelings that they may have on the given scenario.

Agencies are also trying to educate and enlist community members as volunteers, as well as using social media to try and change the current anti-police narrative. A large portion of the general public have an extremely limited knowledge of law enforcement and policing in general. In order to help educate more of the public some agencies have developed citizen police academies. These academies have two main goals: educate the public about law enforcement, and to improve police-community relationships (Lee, 2016). The logic behind these types of academies is based on data that show communities that have a higher level of police-community involvement have higher rates of community satisfaction and support for their local police force (Lytle & Bolger, 2017). Additionally, there is hope that citizens who complete these types of academies will go on to support the police through volunteering, crime reporting, participation in crime prevention programs, and serve as an advocate for police (Lee, 2016).

Police in America do not operate in a vacuum. Police agencies and their officers are members of society and play a hugely impactful role in society. Tyler (2017) argues that law enforcement would make an even greater positive impact on society if they tailored their efforts to promote public trust rather than simply focusing on crime prevention/reduction. Agencies are

beginning to come to this realization as well and are placing a greater focus on community relations, especially in the area of police-youth relations. Youths have been shown to have a more negative view of the police than do adults, and these negative attitudes have been shown to predict negative encounters with the police in the future (Lee, Heafner, Sabatelli, & LaMotte, 2017). Various programs have been created in order to improve police-juvenile relations which have had varying degrees of success. Connecticut's Side-by-Side Program is an example of a successful program where police officers and juveniles interact in non-enforcement settings and engage in activities that are enjoyable for both groups. This program allows juveniles to see officers as people rather than just a police officer, and officers are able to interact with the juveniles and connect with them on a personal level allowing for a greater level of understanding in both groups (Lee, et al., 2017). Given how involved today's youth are with social media, many agencies have begun using social media as a method to improve their image as well as improving crime solving. A study conducted in Arkansas showed great improvement in community relations as well as increased number of tips leading to the solving of crimes for agencies who actively used sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube (Beshears, 2017).

### **Cumulative Effect**

All of the previous topics that have been discussed build upon each other to create a difficult, if not impossible, environment for law enforcement to work in. Officers are leaving the profession, and those that remain are experiencing more health issues such as gastrointestinal issues, heart disease, and PTSD. To a large extent this could be due to increased prolonged stress that takes its toll on officers physically, mentally, and emotionally. The job itself, by nature, is stressful but the social and political environment in which officers have to work has changed

drastically over the past few years and has created even more stressors. Police officers are exposed to stressful events more than other professions (Maran, Varetto, Zedda, & Ieraci, 2015) and this cumulative stress leads to health, family, and professional issues. Retired officers who were surveyed cited the stress of the job as one of the biggest motivating factors when deciding when to retire (Parnaby & Weston, 2020). Law enforcement agencies have slowly begun to realize the benefits of offering support programs for officers who need it. Officers who deal with distressing material, such as child pornography and sexual assaults, typically have access to more support programs than do regular patrol officers (Denk-Florea, et al., 2020), but an increasing number of agencies are providing mental health programs for all of their officers (Krueger, Counts, & Riley, 2017). Thankfully officers are beginning to receive the support from their employers that they need to deal with the stresses of the job, but sadly are getting less and less support from the public that they serve, the politicians that control their funding, and the media that rabidly reports any and all instances of police misconduct especially if there is a racial aspect to exploit.

### **Summary**

In 1943 Abraham Maslow proposed his hierarchy of needs theory. His theory became the standard by which employers developed methods of motivating employees and ensuring employee job satisfaction. Two of the levels of Maslow's hierarchy that are the focus of the current research are safety and belonging. Law enforcement is a high-stress and dangerous profession in and of itself. Officers are subjected to repeated traumatic events, threats to life, verbal and physical assaults, and what is an increasingly hostile and non-supportive society and media. In America today we are faced with a growing crisis in law enforcement due to more officers choosing to leave the profession and at the same time the number of new officers

entering the field is declining. This phenomenon has broad implications for everyone living in the United States. The issue of officer retirement has typically focused on mental and physical health issues that officers develop or sustain over their careers. One of the chief factors researched is stress and how cumulative stress leads to officers having health issues. However, current research is extremely deficient in studying how the current media and political climate may be adding additional stress to officers and causing many to leave the profession. Law enforcement officers today are portrayed as racists who continually use excessive force and execute unarmed minorities with impunity to the point that it is considered to be a national health crisis. Two major problems exist with this current narrative. First, it is difficult to obtain a true picture of just how often officers use force and of that what percentage would be considered excessive due to the fact that there is no uniform way of collecting this data and no central database to allow for study and analysis. Second, the majority of the literature that exists looking at officer involved shooting and use of force start from the viewpoint that law enforcement *is* inherently racist and then goes on to try and prove that assumption rather than trying to determine *if* law enforcement is racist. The current research hopes to fill in some of the gaps to determine how this current narrative being driven by the media and political figures is affecting law enforcement officers and if it is driving more officers to leave the profession.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

### Overview

Law enforcement, as a profession, has been the subject of numerous news stories involving the shootings of black males by white officers with many citing these instances as proof of deep-seated racism which rises to the level of a public health crisis (Radebe, 2021). These high-profile stories have led to increased public scrutiny as well as more widespread anti-police political rhetoric with some activists calling for the police to be defunded (O'Rourke, Su, & Binder, 2021). These recent events have many officers, who have served their profession honorably for many years, questioning how much support they now have from the public and other officers questioning whether remaining in the profession is worth the risk in the current climate (Nix, Wolfe, & Campbell, 2018). The ProQoL survey results are used to determine the prevalence of burnout among police officers in both small rural agencies as well as larger more urban agencies. A selection of officers who completed the ProQoL survey and volunteered for an interview were chosen for in person interviews to determine the factors contributing to burnout, particularly media and political rhetoric influence.

### Design

The current study was conducted as a mixed method design which utilizes both quantitative data and qualitative data. Quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques have both strengths and weaknesses. Mixed method design works on the assumption that by combining the strengths of both types, a greater understanding of the research problem or questions can be obtained (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this study the type of mixed method design chosen is referred to a Two-Phase Explanatory Sequential Design. Using this type of design allows for the initial quantitative data, in this case the ProQoL survey, to identify results

that need follow-up study. Once the quantitative data requiring follow-up has been identified, qualitative data collection and analysis can be done to better understand the quantitative data collected (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In other words, using a mixed method design allows researchers to look beyond the numbers and determine what factors are the driving force behind them.

In this study the Professional Quality of Life scale, ProQoL, was used to determine the percentage of officers at risk of, or suffering from, burnout and compassion fatigue. A simple t-test applied to the results was used to compare officers' levels of burnout and compassion fatigue by department size.

The bulk of the study was constructed as a phenomenological design. Phenomenological research focuses on individuals who share a common phenomenon. It explores how these individuals interpret and derive meaning from the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach was chosen because the goal of the study was to understand law enforcement officers' feelings and beliefs about the current climate and what factors are influencing these feelings and beliefs. Furthermore, using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory as a guide, the phenomenological design was better able to determine how the current political and media climate is impacting an officer's sense of support from the public and their agencies, as well as their thoughts about how their safety may be impacted during this time. While assumptions can be drawn by examining survey data, such as officer turnover and retirement filings, the feelings and beliefs of these officers are not shown by strictly numerical data. In this study a consensual phenomenological qualitative design was chosen because consensual phenomenological research (CQR) is used when studying inner experiences, attitudes and beliefs that are not readily observable. Furthermore, CQR is widely used in the social sciences and has specifically been



used in measuring burnout in medical professionals. With such strong precedent in the discipline and with burnout specifically, the design provided an appropriate and meaningful way to measure and explain law enforcement burnout (Hill & Knox, 2021).

### **Research Questions**

Research Question 1: How many officers working in small rural agencies that have been largely unimpacted by the recent civil unrest/riots that have occurred, as compared to agencies in large urban areas are either contemplating or have already decided to take early retirement or to leave the profession all together?

This hypothesis is proposed at a 95% confidence interval with a p-value of  $\leq 0.05$ . In the case that the p-value is  $< 0.05$  the null hypothesis will be rejected.

**H<sub>0</sub>1.** There is no statistical difference with early retirement between rural and urban police agencies.

**H<sub>a</sub>1.** There is statistically significant difference with early retirement between rural and urban agencies.

Research Question 2: How does the percentage of officers suffering from burnout or compassion fatigue differ between officers in rural and urban agencies?

This hypothesis is proposed at a 95% confidence interval with a p-value of  $\leq 0.05$ . In the case that the p-value is  $< 0.05$  the null hypothesis will be rejected.

**H<sub>0</sub>2.** There is no statistical difference with burnout between rural and urban police agencies.

**H<sub>a</sub>2.** There is statistically significant difference with burnout between rural and urban agencies.

Research Question 3: Of those officers who are contemplating early retirement or leaving the profession, what are the driving factors behind these decisions, particularly how much of a role does the media and political rhetoric play in these decisions?

Research Question 4: As it relates to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory, how do officers describe the impact that media coverage and political rhetoric are having on the amount of support officers receive from their agencies and the public/communities that they serve?

Research Question 5: How are media coverage and political rhetoric impacting officer views on their overall safety and their ability to effectively do their job?

### **Setting**

As stated earlier, the effect that the current political and media climate is having on law enforcement officers is of personal significance to myself, having spent two decades in law enforcement and law enforcement training. Furthermore, since my career has been devoted to western North Carolina, this geographic region is of personal significance as well, so the six agencies involved in this study are located in western and central North Carolina. These six agencies encompass both small and large sheriff's offices and police departments. Rather than using specific names, each agency was given a specific code to differentiate them within the data but allows for their anonymity to remain intact.

### **Participants**

There was a total of six agencies involved in this study made up of three small agencies and three large agencies. The participants in the study were from each agency involved. Each participant was asked to complete and sign a Consent to Participate in Research Project waiver (Appendix D). The consent form could be returned as a hard copy or could be completed and signed electronically. All officers in each participating agency had the opportunity to complete the ProQoL survey and thus the sample size was dependent on the number of officers who chose to participate. All officers in each agency who chose to take the ProQoL survey was also provided the opportunity to volunteer to take part in the one-on-one interviews. This allowed for

data to be collected from officers at all levels of each department. During the survey portion of the study using convenience sampling allowed for a greater number of potential participants to be reached and thus a greater amount of data to be collected. Convenience sampling has been used extensively in measuring job satisfaction and other work-related issues (Rahman & Haleem, 2018) and since the ProQoL survey is designed to measure burnout and compassion fatigue, it is a logical conclusion that this sampling method would yield the best results. ProQoL survey participants were asked to provide various demographic and descriptive information to include age, current job assignment, years of service and their willingness to take part in further interviews. This demographic information was used for comparison during the data analysis, which is discussed in detail shortly, and also provided the basis for selecting individuals to be personally interviewed.

Participants for personal interviews were selected using purposive sampling. A minimum of five participants were intended to be interviewed from each agency participating in the study. Participants were those who were identified in the ProQoL study as willing to be interviewed and found to be at the highest risk of burnout and compassion fatigue. Officers selected for interviews represented both genders as well as various ages and length of service. Purposive sampling was used because the study aimed to determine how officers are being affected by the current political and media climate, and using officers at increased risk of burnout should provide insight into whether politics and media are adding to this burnout or if it is some other factor(s). Memisoglu (2017) contends that purposive sampling in qualitative research allows for a more direct route to research and answer the question at hand.

## Procedures

This study was conducted in a simple two step procedure. The first step was to administer the ProQoL survey to the officers working in the agencies identified (see Appendix A and B). Surveys were conducted using email by providing a link to the survey using the Google Forms platform. The original survey link was sent to the established contact person at each agency involved and then the link was forwarded to all officers via each agency's interdepartmental email system. The survey remained active for a total of four weeks with reminder emails sent each week to encourage increased participation. The data was then collected and recorded using a Google forms spreadsheet. The results were grouped by agency size to allow for an easier comparison between the smaller and larger departments.

The results of the ProQoL survey were also used to identify and select the participants used for the personal interview portion of the study. Those officers who volunteered for future interviews by checking and filling out the volunteer portion of the survey were contacted via email to determine if they were still interested in participating. Of these final volunteers, a purposive sample of at least five officers from each department was to be selected to ensure that a representative sample is achieved to cover the various demographics and length of service present. Using a minimum of five officers was intended for an adequate coverage of the available demographics and years of experience found in the small agency samples, and it allowed for additional interviewees to be selected from the large agencies to cover any demographics not found in smaller agencies. All interviews were conducted either by face-to-face interviews or via an online meeting using Zoom. An audio or video recording was made of each interview and a written transcript was also created.

### **The Researcher's Role**

In this study my role as the researcher was to administer the ProQoL survey, compile the survey data, identify interview participants, conduct/record interviews, and conduct the final coding and analysis of the qualitative results. As the sole researcher I was not allowed to introduce any personal bias or feelings into the face-to-face interviews, but rather to ask each participant the same questions and only provide clarification to the question asked if needed. My opinions and feelings were not to be made known to interview participants.

Being a law enforcement officer can also present certain challenges as well as offering some benefits. The first challenge was the fact that I am currently a sworn deputy with two of the small rural agencies who took part in the study, and I have worked with many of the officers there and I have also personally trained many of the newer officers there. In one way this familiarity may have hindered some officers from speaking freely, but on the other hand this familiarity may also have caused some to be even more open. While I have not worked with any of the officers in the other agencies, being a fellow law enforcement officer may have helped those interviewed to be more open and honest as we shared a common bond in terms of being a part of the law enforcement family. Familiarity with the law enforcement subculture as well as slang terminology allowed for a more accurate interpretation and analysis of interview data.

### **Data Collection**

Two types of data collection were used in this study: survey and interviews. Since this study was a mixed methods study, the ProQoL survey used provided quantitative data to allow for comparison between the rate of burnout between officers from smaller departments that have been relatively unimpacted by recent protests against law enforcement, and those officers in larger agencies who have been directly impacted by such events. One-on-one interviews allow us

to go beyond the numbers and gain a better insight into how the current climate and recent events are impacting officers on a personal level and how this personal impact is affecting the profession of law enforcement. Furthermore, interviews allow for a deeper dive into the statistical data obtained from Research Question 1 and 2 to determine why officers are contemplating early retirement and experiencing higher burnout.

### **Survey**

This study began by using the Professional Quality of Life Scale, or ProQoL survey. The ProQoL is a thirty question self-report survey that measures two different constructs known as compassion satisfaction (CS) and compassion fatigue (CF). Compassion fatigue is made of two subcategories which are burnout and secondary traumatic stress (STS) (Stamm, 2010) and these two subcategories were of primary concern for this study. All questions are answered using a five-point Likert scale: 1=Never, 2=Rarely, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Very often. The survey was not simply scored as an overall raw score, but rather certain questions were designed to measure certain categories. Items 3, 6, 12, 18, 20, 22, 24, 27, and 30 are used to measure the level of CS. Burnout includes items 1, 4, 8, 10, 15, 17, 19, 21, 26, and 29. STS items include numbers 2, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 14, 23, 25, and 28. CS and STS results were simply added together to get a raw score for each but the burnout items required a unique step. Items 1, 4, 15, 17, and 29 must be reversed so that 1=5, 2=4, 3=3, 4=2, and 5=1 (Stamm, 2010). Once the score totals for each section had been computed, the levels of each category could be easily classified as being low, moderate or high according to the interpretation scale included in the ProQoL manual.

Construct validity of the ProQoL scale has been well established with hundreds of papers published (Stamm, 2010). Many of today's studies conducted on professional quality of life issues use the ProQoL scale. The ProQoL survey has been used when studying child protection

workers (Geoffrion, Lamothe, Morizot, & Giguere, 2019), support professionals (Keesler & Fukui, 2020), as well as law enforcement officers and investigators (Tehrani, 2018).

## **Interviews**

Using the results of the ProQoL survey (Appendix A and B), officers who had volunteered to be interviewed provided the sample pool for the interview process. A purposive sample of at least five officers from each agency was to be selected to ensure that a representative sample was chosen. A semi-structured interview process was used for this study. A semi-structured interview allowed for rapport building between interviewer and participant, as well as allowing for in-depth and consistent information gathering among participants (Hill & Knox, 2021). The following are the questions asked during the interview phase (Appendix C):

1. Please introduce yourself and give a little information about your background.
2. What motivated you to begin a career in law enforcement?
3. What do you feel are the most rewarding aspects of being a law enforcement officer?
4. How have things changed since you first began your career?
5. What are the main factors that have caused these changes and how have they led or aided these changes?
6. How much support do you feel you get from the communities that you serve and has this level of support changed over the past few years?
7. If your level of support has changed what factors to you attribute to this and why?
8. How would you describe your level of satisfaction with your career as a law enforcement officer?
9. Describe your overall view of law enforcement today in terms of officer safety, public support, media coverage, and political discourse.

10. What are your feelings on the recent reports of an increased number of officers leaving the profession, and what do you think is driving them to leave the profession?
11. Have you thought about leaving the profession? Why or why not?
12. What is the largest obstacle that law enforcement, as a profession, is facing and how do you see things working out?
13. Discuss your view of how the media covers law enforcement and whether it has a positive or negative impact on law enforcement officers in general.
14. Discuss your view of how political rhetoric locally and nationally is impacting how officers do their jobs and what issues this rhetoric is creating or addressing.
15. Thank you for your time and willingness to participate. I have one final question, is/are there any question(s) that you think should have been asked or is there anything that you would like to add to what we have discussed?

Questions 1 through 3 are basic questions designed to establish a rapport between the interview participant and myself. They were also intended to allow the participant to relax and not feel as though they were being interrogated and that their answers were truly important to the study. Law enforcement has long understood the need to develop a rapport with interview subjects to help gain more truthful and complete statements (Garbutt, 2020) and it is safe to assume that when law enforcement officers are the ones being interviewed the same would hold true.

Questions 4 through 14 were aimed at addressing research questions 3 through 5. These questions focused on the various issues that officers are facing today and what factors are driving these issues. While the statistical data obtained from the ProQoL can shed some light on how law enforcement officers are handling the current political and media climate, simple statistical data



is often of lesser quality and does a poor job of explaining a phenomenon due to lower-quality data being provided by some study participants (DeSimone & Harms, 2018). These open-ended interview questions were designed to address the critical questions covered in this study by allowing participants to elaborate on their answers rather than simply responding with simple one-word answers (Hill & Knox, 2021).

### **Data Analysis**

The ProQoL survey provides data pertaining to compassion fatigue, burnout, and secondary trauma. A simple t-test analysis was used to compare the rates of burnout, secondary trauma and compassion fatigue between officers working in large and small departments. A t-test was chosen to determine if the mean scores between the two different size departments significantly differ from each other. To conduct the t test in SPSS the answers *yes* and *no* must be given a numeric value. In this case *yes* answers were given a value of 1 while *no* answers were given a value of 2. If the p-value of this test is greater than .05 the null hypothesis was to be rejected and a statistically significant correlation is present.

Data collected during officer interviews was reviewed using a thematic analysis approach. Officer interview transcripts first underwent a complete review to ensure that there were no errors or omissions in the data. Once the transcripts had been reviewed the coding process began to break the data down into identifiable descriptions and themes. Finally, the results were reported in a narrative fashion to discuss the uncovered themes in greater detail and to relate the findings to existing literature as to the relationship between law enforcement, the media, and politics. Each research question was addressed individually and reported the findings from the large and small agency samples separately to allow for a comparison of the two sample groups.

### **Trustworthiness**

The primary method to ensure trustworthiness was the use of member checks. Conducting follow-up interviews with study participants served as a check to ensure that the completed findings were accurate and adequately portrayed the information gathered in the initial interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Peer review was also used to gain an independent perspective on the research process. Any and all modifications made due to peer review or member checks was completely recorded and included in the final report.

### **Credibility**

The ProQoL survey has been widely used in research with various helping professions and has shown to be valid and reliable (Stamm, 2010). By adhering to the prescribed process of administering and scoring the ProQoL survey as laid out in the ProQoL manual, credibility can be insured.

In the qualitative portion of the study credibility was established by ensuring that participant interviews produce information that was rich in detail and was based on participants' individual experiences and beliefs and not based on superficial answers. By allowing individuals to speak freely in a private setting, the information gathered should be more honest, straightforward, and richer in detail. This approach is crucial to both qualitative and mixed methods approach to research by enhancing researcher-participant interaction and allowing the participants to fully explain the lived experiences that are the focus of the research (VanderKaay, et. al., 2018).

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability can be enhanced by the use of interview audits, and the adherence to data collection and analysis steps (Hays & McKibben, 2020). In this study all basic interview questions were detailed as well as all follow-up exploratory questions. Keeping a detailed record

of all research procedures used, as well as allowing interview participants to review their interview transcripts should have ensured dependability as well as allowing this study to be replicated in other locations with great ease.

### **Generalizability**

Generalizability has often been considered unimportant in qualitative research and has even been seen as a limitation in some instances (Hays & McKibben, 2020). However, law enforcement officers often share many of the same character traits and tend to view things through a similar lens (Tomazevic & Aristovnik, 2019). Due to this similar world view, it is believed that this study could be replicated in other geographic areas. In studying both large urban and small rural departments this study should have been able to achieve what Hays and McKibben (2020) refer to as *inferential generalizability* where the readers of the study are able to determine the extent to which the findings are able to be applied to a given situation or context.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All possible precautions were taken to ensure that there were no ethical issues during the study. The main ethical consideration deals with participant anonymity. To ensure that all participants remain anonymous the following steps were taken. Step one: when conducting the ProQoL survey no specific identification information such as name or address was collected. Only information regarding demographic information, such as race and sex, and information about years of service were collected. Statistical data was stored with no identification information and only used a number system to differentiate between participants. Step two: all participants who volunteered for face-to-face interviews were assigned identification codes such as Officer 1, Officer 2, etc. All audio and/or video recordings were collected and stored by the

researcher and will be destroyed upon successful completion of the study. All written transcripts were also collected and stored by the researcher and has remained in the researcher's possession only.

Due to my two decades working in law enforcement I do have an emotional and professional interest in the results of this study. However, by using a standardized survey, the ProQOL in this case, any personal bias or interest was removed. In addition, strictly adhering to the interview questions presented and not contributing my own views, opinions, or concerns during the interview minimized any undue influence that my personal interests may have.

### **Summary**

This study employed a mixed method approach to gain a more complete picture of the effect that media coverage and political rhetoric is having on law enforcement officers and their desire to continue working in the field of law enforcement. Combining both qualitative and quantitative data allows for a deeper understanding of the problem rather than a mere superficial look at the numbers. Quantitative data was obtained through the ProQoL survey that measures the level of burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary trauma among officers from both large and small law enforcement agencies. A t-test was conducted to measure the mean variance between small and large agencies. Qualitative data was collected through personal interviews from officers selected to participate. A complete transcript from each interview was created and then subjected to a thematic coding process to identify various themes that were uncovered. The results of the coding process were then reported in a narrative fashion using direct quotes to help support the conclusions derived from the data.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### Overview

The purpose of this study was to understand the number of law enforcement officers who are considering early retirement, or simply considering leaving the profession, and to determine how much of a driving force media coverage and political climate are for officers located in small rural agencies that have been largely uninvolved in recent civil unrest and riots, as well as some larger agencies that may have been involved in this unrest. This chapter will present the data collected as well give a description, or portrait, of each participant using pseudonyms rather than actual names. This chapter will begin by examining Research Questions 1 and 2 providing the quantitative data gathered from the ProQoL survey, then transition to the qualitative portion of the research. The qualitative portion will begin with an overview of the coding process and the identification of the themes discovered in the research, followed by Research Questions 3-5 being addressed individually.

### RQ 1: Officers Leaving Early

RQ 1: How many officers working in small rural agencies that have been largely unimpacted by the recent civil unrest/riots that have occurred, as compared to agencies in large urban areas are either contemplating or have already decided to take early retirement or to leave the profession all together?

This hypothesis is proposed at a 95% confidence interval with a p-value of  $\leq 0.05$ . In the case that the p-value is  $< 0.05$  the null hypothesis will be rejected.

**H<sub>0</sub>1.** There is no statistical difference with early retirement between rural and urban police agencies.

**H<sub>a</sub>1.** There is statistically significant difference with early retirement between rural and urban

agencies.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Officers and Their Thoughts and Plans for Early Retirement

	Group	n	Mean	Std. Dev	Std. Error
Thought	1.00	22	1.41	.503	.107
	2.00	17	1.41	.507	.123
Planning	1.00	22	1.50	.511	.109
	2.00	17	1.65	.492	.119

*Note.* Group number 1=large agency. Group number 2=small agency. Yes answers=1. No answers=2.

The first research question aimed to determine if there was a difference between larger and smaller agencies in terms of the number of officers who have contemplated or have decided to leave the profession early either through early retirement or simply leaving the profession outright. Data for this question was collected in the supplemental questions added to the ProQoL survey which first asked if the officer had or was contemplating leaving the profession early within the last year, and secondly asked if they are in fact planning on leaving.

The small agency sample had a total of 17 (n=17) respondents with an average of 12.6 years of service among them. Of the 17 respondents the majority (eight) were assigned to patrol, six were assigned to investigations, one was in administration, and one was classified as *other*. In response to the question of whether they had contemplated taking early retirement or leaving the profession within the last year, a total of ten (10) said yes while seven (7) said that they had not contemplated it. When asked the follow up question about if they were actually planning on leaving the profession in the near future, six (6) said that they were in fact planning on leaving while eleven (11) said that they were not planning on leaving.

The large agency sample had a total of 22 (n=22) respondents with an average of 17 years of service. Much like in the smaller agency sample, the majority (twelve) were assigned to

patrol, four (4) were assigned to investigations, three (3) were in administration, and three (3) were classified as *other*. In response to the question of whether they had contemplated taking early retirement or leaving the profession within the last year, a total of 13 said yes while only nine (9) said no. When asked the follow up question about if they were actually planning on leaving the profession in the near future, 12 officers said yes that they were planning on leaving in the near future while 10 said they were not planning on leaving in the near future.

Table 2

T-Test Results Comparing Intentions Regarding Early Retirement Between Large and Small Agency Officers

	SD	S.D. Mean	95% CI of the Difference		t	df	P
			Lower	Upper			
Thought	.163	-.003	-.334	.329	-.016	34.4	.987
Planning	.161	-.147	-.475	.181	-.909	35.2	.370

In order to conduct the t test in SPSS the answers *yes* and *no* had to be given a numeric value. In this case *yes* answers were given a value of 1 while *no* answers were given a value of 2. The results of the t test revealed a p-value of 0.987 for officers who have thought about leaving the profession, and a p-value of 0.370 for officers who are in fact planning on leaving. The 0.370 p-value for officers who are planning on leaving the profession is much higher than the 0.05 limit proposed in the initial hypothesis and thus the null hypothesis would typically be accepted. However, given the very low sample size, especially in the large urban agency sample, it is necessary to acknowledge the survey samples may be subject to some degree of self-selection bias and may impact the generalizability of the study which is discussed in more detail in the limitations section of Chapter 5.

## RQ 2: Officers Experiencing Burnout and Compassion Fatigue

RQ 2: How does the percentage of officers suffering from burnout or compassion fatigue differ between officers in rural and urban agencies?

The hypothesis is proposed at a 95% confidence interval with a p-value of  $\leq 0.05$ . In the case that the p-value is  $< 0.05$  the null hypothesis will be rejected.

**H<sub>0</sub>2.** There is no statistical difference with burnout between rural and urban police agencies.

**H<sub>a</sub>2.** There is statistically significant difference with burnout between rural and urban agencies.

Research Question 2 looked at the difference between officers from small agencies and large agencies in terms of burnout and compassion fatigue/satisfaction as measured by the ProQoL survey. Below, Table 3 shows individual score results from the ProQoL survey.

Table 3

### Individual Officer Scores for Compassion Fatigue, Burnout and Secondary Trauma Obtained from the ProQoL Survey

<u>Grouping</u>	<u>Compassion</u>	<u>Burnout</u>	<u>Secondary Trauma</u>
Large	37	28	31
Large	48	10	21
Large	41	19	23
Large	28	29	26
Large	49	15	15
Large	35	23	26
Large	42	16	16
Large	49	12	11
Large	26	35	25
Large	38	24	23
Large	45	25	35
Large	40	20	19
Large	45	26	20
Large	24	36	34
Large	40	27	22
Large	46	18	23
Large	33	40	40
Large	32	22	32
Large	24	37	36



Large	44	15	12
Large	30	22	19
Large	30	29	25
Small	33	21	17
Small	48	20	18
Small	46	26	27
Small	35	32	31
Small	45	23	23
Small	34	35	40
Small	42	22	29
Small	33	29	24
Small	38	22	28
Small	31	27	15
Small	34	34	26
Small	44	27	31
Small	38	35	29
Small	38	22	14
Small	36	29	35
Small	42	38	35
Small	30	27	32

The first measurement was for compassion fatigue/satisfaction which measures the level of satisfaction that an officer receives from being able to perform their job. The scores can range from a low of 10 to a high of 50. Higher scores indicate that an officer is more satisfied with their job and derives more enjoyment from it. Lower scores would indicate compassion fatigue where the officer is getting less reward from their job. The average score for those respondents from small agencies for compassion fatigue/satisfaction was 38 (Table 4) whereas the average score for those in larger agencies was 37.5. According to the ProQoL scoring guidelines, scores between 23 and 41 would be in the moderate range of compassion satisfaction. The officers surveyed, regardless of agency size, placed in the upper portion of the moderate range with officers from smaller agencies reporting a slightly higher level of satisfaction than those from larger agencies. When a t-test is conducted the result is a p-value of 0.817 which suggests that the size of an agency may not impact the amount of compassion fatigue that officers experience.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for Compassion Fatigue

Grouping	n	Mean	SD	SD Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	P
Large	22	37.5	8.17	1.74	-4.97	3.94	-.233	36.5	.817
Small	17	38.1	5.53	1.34					

In order to quantify the level of burnout the ProQoL survey measures two separate variables to get a better view of how respondents are being affected by their jobs. The first variable is burnout itself (Table 5). The average score of officers in small agencies was 27.5 whereas the average score for larger agencies was 24. As before, scores between 23 and 41 would be in the moderate range of burnout and both types of agencies fall into this category. However, the sample from the larger agencies were very near the lowest end of the moderate scale and thus show a lower risk of suffering from burnout. These scores produced a p-value of 0.114 again suggesting a minimal link between agency size and burnout.

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics for Burnout

Grouping	n	Mean	SD	SD Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	P
Large	22	24.0	8.23	1.75	-4.97	3.94	-1.62	36.5	.114
Small	17	27.5	5.60	1.36					

The final variable the ProQoL measures is secondary trauma which is the exposure to extremely or traumatically stressful events due to one's job (Table 6). The average secondary trauma score for officers in small agencies is 26.7 and 24.3 for those in larger agencies. Again,

we see that both size agencies are in the moderate range of scoring with larger agency officers having a lower score. This data provides a p-value of 0.328.

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics for Secondary Trauma

Grouping	n	Mean	SD	SD Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	P
Large	22	24.2	7.81	1.66	-7.41	2.54	-.992	35.3	.328
Small	17	26.7	7.42	1.80					

The two variables that are of main concern in this study is that of burnout and secondary trauma. We find that with both variables the p-values, 0.114 and 0.328 are much greater than the .05 standard set in the initial hypotheses thus typically resulting in the acceptance of the null hypothesis. As pointed out in the findings of Research Question 1, given the very low sample size, especially in the large urban agency sample, it is necessary to acknowledge the survey samples may be subject to some degree of self-selection bias and may impact the generalizability of the study which is discussed in more detail in the limitations section of Chapter 5.

### **Interview Participants**

There was a total of 11 officers who took part in the interview portion of the study. A total of 6 officers were employed with one of the large agencies who participated and the other 5 belonged to the smaller agencies who participated. All agencies participating in the study were represented in the ProQoL survey data; however, only four out of the six participating agencies were represented during the interview portion. This is unfortunate in that there were not enough volunteers to ensure that all participating agencies were represented in the interview portion, but the total number of interviews conducted still represented a robust sample and acceptable diversity of officers. The following information is gathered from interview questions 1-3 and has

been condensed to provide a brief portrait of each participant interviewed and gives a glimpse into their backgrounds as well as their reasoning for entering the field of law enforcement. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the participants and this pseudonym designation will remain constant throughout the presentation of the results.

### **Officer 1**

Officer 1 began their law enforcement career a little over fifteen years ago after serving in the United States Marine Corps. The main driving force behind his/her decision to go into law enforcement is their commitment to service and desire to see others benefit and succeed. Officer 1 believes the most rewarding aspect of law enforcement is being able to see an offender, or victim, be able to turn their lives around or to keep going and see their lives improve while knowing that Officer 1 played a role in that success. Officer 1 is from the small agency sample.

### **Officer 2**

Officer 2 has just a little over two years of law enforcement experience and entered law enforcement after serving four years in the United States Marine Corps. This officer believes that law enforcement saved them and gave them purpose again. Officer 2 felt lost after leaving the Marines and becoming a law enforcement officer gave him/her purpose again and renewed their spirit. Their most rewarding aspect of law enforcement is being able to help those they come into contact with and helping to make the community a little safer. Officer 2 is part of the small agency sample.

### **Officer 3**

Officer 3 has just over twelve years of experience in law enforcement and has held varied positions within their department. This officer initially chose to go into law enforcement because the economy, at that time, was down and they needed a steady job and paycheck. However,

he/she soon felt that law enforcement was more than a job and that they were now a part of something much larger. The most rewarding aspects of law enforcement for Officer 3 is feeling like they are part of a team and having a positive impact on teens and young kids. Officer 3 is part of the small agency sample.

#### **Officer 4**

Officer 4 has over 20 years of experience and began their career after initially seeking a career in academia. Officer 4 credits joining the Marine Corps with giving them the idea of becoming a law enforcement officer. The most rewarding aspect of the job for this officer is helping victims of trauma, especially child victims, to deal with the trauma and help them get their lives back on track and to succeed. Officer 4 is part of the large agency sample.

#### **Officer 5**

Officer 5 is a 27-year law enforcement veteran and is looking forward to retirement once they reach their full 30 years of service. Officer 5 says that law enforcement is the only job that they have ever wanted to do and they feel like they were born to be a law enforcement officer. They are motivated most by helping others and motivating their fellow officers to succeed. However, their most rewarding parts of the job are the simple “thank you” that they get from members of the public and especially those from young kids and adolescents. Officer 5 is part of the large agency sample.

#### **Officer 6**

Officer 6 is an 18-year veteran officer who was also a member of the Air Force prior to law enforcement. Officer 6 originally wanted to go into some branch of Federal law enforcement but settled into a local agency instead. The most rewarding aspects of the job for them is to help victims, solve crimes, and arresting violators. Officer 6 also enjoys being able to explain the

process to victims, and offenders, so that they can have a complete understanding of what has and will happen to allow them to gain a better sense of closure in their lives with the ordeal in question. Officer 6 is part of the large agency sample.

#### **Officer 7**

Officer 7 has a little over 5 years of experience as a law enforcement officer. Having been raised in a military family they always felt that they had a duty to serve their community and decided to go into law enforcement rather than go into the military. Helping victims and seeing them get a happy ending is what drives them to be a better officer. Officer 7 is part of the large agency sample.

#### **Officer 8**

Officer 8 has five years of experience and cites a call to service as the reason that they became a law enforcement officer. Officer 8 believes that the greatest aspect of law enforcement is being able to see people in their *raw* state and learning how to view the world through the eyes of others and helping to guide others. Officer 8 is part of the large agency sample.

#### **Officer 9**

Officer 9 is a 15-year veteran officer and is also a member of the armed forces. The need to provide for their family is what led them to choose a career in law enforcement. Officer 9 cites a desire to help others as one of the main rewards of the job. However, they also contend that law enforcement does not allow you to be able to help someone as much as they would really like to. Officer 9 is part of the large agency sample.

#### **Officer 10**

Officer 10 is a 12-year veteran officer and is also a member of the armed forces. Officer 10 started his career in law enforcement after seeing their father work as an officer prior to going

into the military as well as not wanting to do a manufacturing job. Honor, respect and public service were the three most rewarding aspects of law enforcement in their opinion. Officer 10 said that they take being a good example to the public, especially the youth, as a very serious responsibility and tries daily to be the best example that they can be. Officer 10 is part of the small agency sample.

### **Officer 11**

Officer 11 is 16-year veteran officer who began their public service career as a volunteer firefighter. At first, they revealed that they were reluctant to go into law enforcement but after some encouragement from some of their friends and coworkers, they decided to go into a career as a law enforcement officer. Officer 11 feels that the most rewarding part of the job are those times where an officer can actually see where they made a difference in someone's life. Officer 11 is part of the small agency sample.

## **Interview Results**

Participant interview transcripts were reviewed to determine the various themes that were present in the given answers. These themes were then examined to see how they related to, or answered, the stated research questions. The following is a breakdown of the themes that were uncovered and how they went towards answering the research questions. A summary of all answers can be found in *Appendix D*.

### **Theme Development**

Data collected during officer interviews was reviewed using a thematic analysis approach. Officer interview transcripts underwent a complete review to ensure that there were no errors or omissions in the data. Once the transcripts had been reviewed the coding process broke the data down into identifiable descriptions and themes. The following is a breakdown of the

codes used and the themes identified in the research. Following this discussion of themes, the results are reported in a narrative fashion to discuss how these themes went towards answering Research Questions 3 through 5.

### **Service**

The first theme that became clear very early on was the concept of service. One of the first questions asked was what motivated the officer to go into law enforcement? Out of the twelve total officers interviewed, nine made a mention of *public service, service to their community, or duty*. Officer 7 said, “my dad was a cop and he always told us that serving the community was what made the job worth it.” Officer 1 echoed this idea when they said, “I was always very service oriented but the Marine Corp taught me that service was an honor.”

The theme of service was especially clear in the responses to the question about the most rewarding part of being a law enforcement officer. All officers interviewed gave one common answer to that question and that answer was *helping others*. Officer 8 gave the most interesting response by saying, “I love to help people and what I really enjoy is learning about the world through other people’s eyes and backgrounds.” Officers 3, 4 and 8 spoke specifically about helping kids either by providing them guidance or helping those that were the victim of a traumatic event. Officer 7 spoke of enjoying seeing a victim “get their happy ending” by seeing their offender arrested and successfully prosecuted. Officer 5 talked about helping but not just helping victims, but also helping other officers. “Now that I am nearing the end of my career I enjoy guiding and motivating other officers to be the best that they can be.” Officer 1 said, “I enjoy seeing someone I interacted with 2 to 3 years down the road and see how they have turned their life around and knowing that I was able to play a small part in that.” Officer 2 saw helping



others as a mutual benefit and said, “helping victims helps me to keep going and gives me back my purpose.”

### **Change**

Change is another theme that became clearly evident. The theme of change related to statements pertaining to *social change, ideological change, change in law enforcement mentality, changes in leadership, and political changes within organizations and governing bodies*. The changes that officers talked about were both positive and negative in nature, however the majority of statements dealing with the theme of change were negative. The two types of change that the majority of the officers saw as the most impactful were social change and political/policy changes within their respective departments and law enforcement in general.

### **Negativity**

All officers interviewed made mention of, or spoke of, some type of negative aspect or phenomenon. This theme of negativity was extremely pervasive when talking about the media whether it was traditional or social media. Codes used to identify this theme were statements such as *we are the bad guys, makes us look bad, and never mention the good things*. All officers interviewed stated to various degrees that the overall portrayal of law enforcement by the media was overall negative and that this coverage was often times pushing a negative, politically driven narrative. Officer 1 summed this sentiment up nicely when they said, “the media they have the fan that they fan those flames, and has all the perfect ingredients to get the public spun up to a fever pitch.” The majority of the officers interviewed believed that the media’s, especially social media’s, barrage of negative and misleading stories about law enforcement is the primary force that is driving many in the public to dislike, distrust, and often straight out hate law enforcement.

Officer 4 said, “They get more clicks with more sensational news. You know, cop did something wrong. That gets a lot of clicks. That takes everybody away, further away from the truth.”

However, an interesting twist when discussing the overwhelmingly negative coverage that the media provides, some officers actually credited this as a reason that their level of support has increased over the past few years. Officer 5 said, “I actually feel that in some aspects I feel more support. Inevitably they always mention because, you know, they mentioned that the media gives us bad rap and this and that.”

### **Fear**

The theme of fear was found throughout the interview process in different and interesting ways. Codes such as *policing scared*, *hands tied*, *risk avoidance*, and *why stick my neck out* were used to identify this theme of fear. None of the officers expressed a fear of being hurt or killed while doing their jobs but many did express a fear of doing their job. The fear of liability had many officers worried to the point that they believe most other officers are scared to do their job. Officer 4 spoke of how this fear is causing officers to be apprehensive about doing their job by saying, “then you add onto that civil liability and see cops getting fired for doing their jobs, and then you wonder why they leave to do something else.” Officer 7 said, “You could get shot, you could get killed, you know, you get hit by a car, but now it's, you can lose your life, you can lose your freedom, and or you can, you can ruin your entire family as well.” However, some officers, while they do not fear being hurt, do believe that they are less safe in general. As Officer 5 put it, “Then for actual safety-wise I feel that it has gotten less safe in some fashion because you see a lot more attacks on law enforcement.”

Not only did the theme of fear apply to how officers felt about doing their jobs but it also applied to how officers felt the public views them. Two officers specifically felt that how law

enforcement has been reported on and portrayed has caused members of the public to literally fear the police because they worry that law enforcement are actually out to kill or hurt them. Officer 9 believed that part of this fear was due to the public being misinformed about what law enforcement actually does. Officer 9 said, “I feel that there's a lot of misinformation now between officers and community members.”

### **Lack of Recruitment**

When asked what is the greatest obstacle that law enforcement faces, every officer interviewed stated that the lack of new officers entering the profession is the greatest problem. The codes that make up this theme are very straight forward and include *short-handed*, *not enough officers*, and *cannot get help*. Sadly, all officers also stated that they saw the problem getting worse before it ever gets better. Officer 6 went as far as to say, “we're on code red as far as hiring, and that's every agency.” The reasons for this lack of new recruits were fairly consistent and was summed up best by Officer 3 who said, “nobody wants to be the police today.” Pay was the most common issue when discussing officer recruitment and retention.

### **Trust**

After reviewing all interview transcripts, the theme of trust was found in each interview regardless of the size of the agency the officer worked for. The loss or deterioration of trust in an officer's agency was identified as the number one way in which media coverage and political rhetoric is impacting how officers are able to do their jobs. Codes such as *thrown under the bus*, *hung out to dry*, *why stick my neck out*, and *ashamed of the profession* where all linked to the theme of trust. Each officer spoke of how media and politics were causing agencies to be so scared of being sued that they have largely stopped supporting their officers and are willing to allow the officer to face the civil, and sometimes criminal, consequences on their own without

any help or defense from their employing agency. This is causing the officers to become less proactive and more cautious when doing their jobs.

Table 7

Themes and Relating Codes

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Codes</u>
Service	Public service Service to the community Duty
Change	Social change Ideological change Change in LE mentality Change in leadership Political change
Negativity	Makes us the bad guys Makes us look bad Never mentions the good things Bad news gets more clicks
Fear	Policing scared Hands tied Risk avoidance Why stick my neck out
Lack of Recruitment	Short-handed Not enough officers Cannot get help No one wants to be the police
Trust	Thrown under the bus Hung out to dry Why stick my neck out Ashamed of the profession

### **Research Question 3: Why are officers contemplating leaving?**

Research Question 3: Of those officers who are contemplating early retirement or leaving the profession, what are the driving factors behind these decisions, particularly how much of a role does the media and political rhetoric play in these decisions?

#### **Small Agency**

Each officer interviewed was asked if they have thought about leaving the profession and why or why not (interview question 11). Of all officers interviewed from small agencies, only Officer 2 said that they had not given serious thought to leaving the profession. Officer 2 said that being a law enforcement officer gave them a sense of purpose and that they did not see themselves ever leaving the profession prior to retirement. All other officers said, without hesitation, that they had thought about leaving the profession several times. Officers 3 and 10 went into greater detail in saying that they thought about leaving the profession regularly but stay due to lack of opportunities. Of the four total officers in the small agency pool who said that they were thinking about leaving the profession, all four of them said it was due to the level of pay, and for lack of opportunities to a lesser extent. In addition, Officer 2 who said that they had not contemplated leaving did state that they believed low pay was the primary reason for officers leaving the profession.

Table 8

Primary Reasons Given for Contemplating Leaving Law Enforcement Profession (Small Agency)

Reason	Number of Responses	Total %
Low Pay	5	100
Low Staffing	4	80
Lack of Opportunity	2	40
Lack of Trust in Agency	4	80
Burnout	2	40

The problem of pay that the officers identified was often said to be compounded by the current lack of personnel. Officers 1 and 2 stated that due to having fewer officers working, their own workload, as well as other officers has increased. Officer 1 stated that in his department even command level officers have been required to work shifts on the road to cover for the manpower shortage. Also, with low manpower some officers felt as though it created an environment that has fewer opportunities to advance which limits their earnings as well as career advancement. As Officer 3 stated, “I just do not see a way to advance. I am just stuck and I have been here too long to start something new.”

Combine the lack of pay with low numbers of personnel and the nature of law enforcement, and it leads some officers to suffer from burnout. Officer 10 mentioned multiple times through their career where they were suffering from burnout and contemplating leaving law enforcement but each time they were able to change positions within the department which helped to reenergize them. Similarly, Officer 3 said, “I just do the same thing over and over again and just try to get through the day.”

Pay and reduced personnel were often the first responses given as to why officers had contemplated leaving the profession, but as each officer would explain their response another

reason became clear and that reason is trust. Officer 1 summed it up best by saying, “It boils down to trust. I don’t trust them to have my back and they don’t appreciate what I do, so why should I stick my neck out for them.” Officer 11 pointed out that officers do not believe that their agencies have their back and that the agencies do not respect the jobs that the officers do.

One of the main areas of focus of this research was to determine if media coverage and political rhetoric were causing officers to leave the profession. None of the officers from small agencies interviewed stated that they believed that the media or political rhetoric were directly causing officers to leave. However, all five interviewed officers believed that both factors were indirectly responsible for officers leaving. Officer 1 believed that the media and politics may cause impatient or immature officers to leave but most officers have a thick enough skin to deal with it. All five of those interviewed felt that the media and politics impacted how law enforcement administrations acted more so than individual officers and the way that organizations were responding to these factors influenced an officer’s decision to leave more so than the media or politics did. Officers 1, 10 and 11 said that the actions taken by agencies due to negative, or even possibly negative, media coverage only drive a wedge between the officers and the agency and impact the amount of trust that officers have in their agency.

### **Large Agency**

In response to interview question 11, all six large agency officers said that they have thought about leaving the profession. Officers 4, 7 and 9 said that they think of leaving regularly or even daily. Officer 9 bluntly said, “I think about quitting every day,” and Officer 7 said, “I think about leaving daily.” Officer 6 said that family was the main reason that they have remained in the profession. All officers mentioned low pay as one of the reasons that they have thought about leaving. Officer 7, who said that they think of leaving daily, said that “with all that

we deal with and such low staffing, we are not getting paid nearly enough for the work that we do.” Officers 4, 7 and 9 also made mention of the fact that people can often get a job working at a fast-food restaurant making as much, or more, than what is currently made by officers.

Table 9

Primary Reasons Given for Contemplating Leaving Law Enforcement Profession (Large Agency)

<u>Reason</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>	<u>Total %</u>
Low Pay	6	100
Low Staffing	6	100
Lack of Opportunity	3	50
Lack of Trust in Agency	5	83
Burnout	4	67
Underappreciated	5	83

Another factor that all six officers mentioned was the lack of manpower and that all officers are having to work more in terms of actual overtime or simply in terms of increased call volume that they were responsible for. This increased workload for little to no extra pay has caused some of the interviewed officers to become somewhat jaded and cynical about their job. Officer 5 said, “why should I have to put up with what I have to put up with, when I could go to another job with zero responsibility and make as much or more.” Also, with low manpower three officers felt as though it created an environment that has fewer opportunities to advance which limits their earnings as well as career advancement. As officer 7 put it, “We have so few officers that there is not a clear path for promotion because when positions do come available, they are not filled because we cannot afford to lose them from the road.”

Out of the six officers interviewed, four made mention that they have suffered from burnout at one point in time or another. Officer 9 mentioned that switching positions helped them



when they were suffering burnout. Officer 9 stated, “I was lucky to have had a supervisor that saw that I was struggling and helped me get transferred to a different position which helped me cope and get a little more enthusiasm for the job again.”

Low pay and low staffing levels were the two most common and first mentioned reasons by all six officers interviewed as to why they had thought about leaving. While these factors are important ones, five out of six officers said that feeling as though they are underappreciated, or not appreciated at all impact their desire to stay more than pay and low numbers. Officer 6 clearly addressed the issue of being underappreciated by agencies or supervisors by saying, “We are told quite often that if we do not like it, there is the door.” Similar statements point to the idea where officers enjoy, or like, what they do but are often not happy about where they must do their job. In addition, this feeling of being undervalued, disrespected, and underappreciated breeds a sense of distrust in officers towards their agencies and administrations. Officer 8 pointed out, “Officers are seeing other agencies basically throw their officers under the bus for just doing their jobs because of the optics, and officers are hesitant to do their jobs for fear of being hung out to dry.”

All six interviewed officers believed that both media and politics were indirectly responsible for officers leaving. Five out of six officers interviewed felt that the media and politics impacted how law enforcement administrations acted more so than individual officers and the way that organizations were responding to these factors influenced an officer’s decision to leave more so than the media or politics did. As Officer 4 said, “the media has agencies so afraid of negative PR or of being sued, and then the fear of losing funding as a result, that they are not backing their officers and trying to practice more risk avoidance than actual law enforcement.” Officer 8 echoed this by saying, “risk avoidance is killing our ability to do our

job.” Officer 5 believed that the politicians’ reaction to negative media coverage was causing law enforcement’s hands to become tied behind their back and causing officers to no longer be proactive. Officer 5 summed it up by saying, “they have our hands tied and agencies are policing scared.”

#### **Research Question 4: How do media and politics impact public support?**

Research Question 4: As it relates to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs theory, how do officers describe the impact that media coverage and political rhetoric is having on the amount of support officers receive from their agencies and the public/communities that they serve?

#### **Small Agency**

Interview questions 6 and 7 focused on the level of support that officers receive from their community, how this level of support has changed, and what has caused this change. Within the small agency sample three officers said that the level of support has increased recently while two said that the level of support is the same. Officer 11 stated that they receive a lot of support from their communities, and it makes officers feel wanted and appreciated. Officer 10 said, “I feel that the support has maybe gotten stronger here. I know that here lately, people have paid for your food anonymously, or just thanking you out of the blue.” Officer 3 said that the community is happy to support local law enforcement, but they just do not want to see you until they need you. Officers 1 and 2 see things a bit differently. Officer 1 said, “After 9/11 law enforcement and first responders were celebrated but fast forward to today with instances like George Floyd and the media stirring the pot, people no longer look at law enforcement with the same sort of reverence.” Officer 2 questioned the public’s true support of law enforcement. “The public may say they support law enforcement, and may tell you thank you, but when you need their help they are just going to stand there with their phone recording you.”

Table 10

Recent Change in the Level of Public Support (Small Agency)

Level	Number of Responses	Total %
Increased	3	60
No Change	2	40
Decreased	0	0

In terms of the role that the media is playing in the level of support received from the community all five officers agreed that the media is playing a large role. All five officers agreed that the overall picture of law enforcement the media is trying to paint is overwhelmingly negative, and three of the officers actually attributed this overwhelmingly negative coverage as a reason for the increase in support. Officer 10 said, “They watch the news and how we are treated, and it is kind of their way of telling us that not everyone hates us and that they do support us and want us here.” Officer 11 believed the increased support came from people seeing negative social media stories and want to let officers know that they have their backs and support them despite what they see or read in the news. Officer 3 said:

We live in a pretty conservative area and most people dismiss or question the media no matter what they report, and when they see these anti-police stories they instinctively push back against them and end up being even more supportive of law enforcement just to spite the media narrative.

However, Officer 1 sees the media as causing support to neither increase nor decrease. Officer 1 stated:

It's like the media have a fan that they fan those flames with, has just the right amount of air pressure, has all the perfect ingredients to get the public spun up to a fever pitch. Then

you have a large number of people dog piling in on one opinion of it, and then you have another big number that will dog pile in on the opposite end of it, and then everybody's colliding in the middle.

Officer 2 said, “the reason people do not support us is because the media has portrayed us as we are just here to enslave people. I think that makes people naturally not want to interact with us.”

Of the five officers interviewed in small agencies, none specifically mentioned political rhetoric as a reason for increased or decreased public support. Officer 3 was the only one to even mention politics when it came to public support, and it was only in terms of law enforcement allowing negative perceptions to continue by not pushing back. “If all that kids see about law enforcement is what they see in the news or on social media, there is no wonder they hate us. We have to do a better job of educating people, and politicians, on what we do.”

Table 11

Reasons Given for Change in Public Support (Small Agency)

<u>Reason</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>	<u>Total %</u>
Negative media coverage	3	60
Politically conservative area	3	60

**Large Agency**

Out of the six officers interviewed from large agencies, only one reported feeling like the support that they get from their communities was declining. Three officers said that their level of support had pretty much stayed the same while the other two said that they believe that they have actually gained more support over the past few years. Officers 4 and 7 said that they attribute the increase in support to a kind of pushback against the overall negative media and political narrative that is currently being produced. Officer 4 went so far as to say, “it’s just a big middle

finger to the media.” Officer 6 said, “the media does not represent the majority. I believe that we have way more supporters than we do detractors.”

Table 12

Recent Change in the Level of Public Support (Large Agency)

Level	Number of Responses	Total %
Increased	2	33
No Change	3	50
Decreased	1	17

All six officers interviewed believed that the media is having an impact on the public’s perception of law enforcement and that the perception being peddled is overwhelmingly negative. Officer 6 went so far as to call the media’s coverage of law enforcement to be total *lies*. While none of the officers interviewed believed that the overall level of community support was decreasing as a result, all officers acknowledged that in certain areas of the community the media is having a negative impact on support. It is well documented that minorities are more likely to have a negative opinion of law enforcement and the six officers who serve communities with higher minority populations all reported still dealing with negative perceptions/opinions. Officer 8 commented that, “going into the areas populated by minorities, you do get more people asking ‘why are you here,’ and you get the feeling that you are not wanted.” Officer 6 does not believe that the minority community has an overall negative view of law enforcement. In fact, Officer 6 said that white college students treat officers worse than any other demographic. Officer 6 said:

We get great feedback from the minority community, but white college students treat us the worst by far. They have never even been to the projects, couldn't tell you where they

are at, but they want to tell you about how we are abusing them and killing people out there. They would not even know how to get to these locations.

While Officer 6 was the only officer to specifically spell out what groups they thought treat officers the worst, but all six officers agreed that it is often those with the least information or idea as to what officers do, that are the most critical and anti-police.

In addition to the media directly contributing to the public's negative perception of law enforcement, many of the officers interviewed also believed that law enforcement in general allows this perception to continue by not standing up and defending themselves. Four out of the six officers interviewed made mention of the fact that law enforcement agencies in general do a very poor job defending attacks and misconceptions leveled at law enforcement by those in the media and politicians. While not totally alone in this belief, Officer 4 was the most direct in their statement when they said, "I am ashamed of what they have let us become. Law enforcement and city administration should take responsibility. We've done a real poor job of sticking up for ourselves for generations." Officer 5 lamented:

Law enforcement is accused of doing this, or not doing that, and are crucified in the court of public opinion and there is no pushback trying to defend our actions or educate people as to what our job really is.

Officer 8 described how one instance impacted him personally:

During a protest someone painted 'defund' in front of our department and it remained there for almost a year. We had to look at that for almost a year and the city did nothing. It brought to light how city hall perceives us because there was no push or drive to remove it in a timely manner.

Table 13

Reasons Given for Change in Public Support (Large Agency)

Reason	Number of Responses	Total %
Negative media coverage	6	100
Poor messaging by LE	4	67
Pushback against media	3	50

**Research Question 5: How are media and politics impacting officer safety and their ability to do their job?**

Research Question 5: How is media coverage and political rhetoric impacting officer views on their overall safety and their ability to effectively do their job?

**Small Agency**

All five of the small agency officers interviewed felt that the media is doing the public, and law enforcement, a major disservice by misinforming the public. The media misinforming the public about how law enforcement does, and should, work is the greatest obstacle officers face in doing their jobs, other than reduced manpower, according to the officers interviewed. All five officers made mention of the media continually portraying law enforcement in a very negative way and not presenting an accurate picture of law enforcement and how they operate. Officer 1 discussed how the media, and sometimes politicians, paint a misleading picture of law enforcement and do not fully explain these situations that they are talking about. Officer 1 also discussed how the media and politicians mislead citizens as to what their constitutional rights really are. Furthermore, these misperceptions of rights lead to people being more combative, verbally and sometimes even physically, and less compliant when interacting with law enforcement due to their belief that the officer is doing something unconstitutional. All because the citizen does not truly understand their rights. These misconceptions complicate how officers

do their jobs and makes things more difficult than they should be. The officers believed that by only focusing on the negatives found in law enforcement that the media and politicians alike do a disservice to officers and make it more difficult for them to do their jobs. Officer 2 mentioned the lack of positive coverage by saying, “they do not talk about the officer who buys a homeless person a meal, they only want to talk about the officer they believe violated someone’s rights.” All five officers interviewed agreed that these misconceptions of law enforcement are what leads the public to distrust or dislike law enforcement.

Table 14

What Actions are the Media and Politicians Taking that is Impacting the Job of Law Enforcement Officers (Small Agency)

<u>Actions</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>	<u>Total %</u>
Misinformation	5	100
Negative portrayal	5	100
Portraying LE as racist	5	100

In terms of officer safety, all officers interviewed believed that the constant negative media coverage makes an officer’s already dangerous job, much less safe. Officer 2 believes that social media and people’s desire to post videos of officers doing something controversial causes people to be more likely to stand around and video an officer in trouble rather than trying to help that officer. Officer 3 said that they have seen an increase in subjects they deal with being more confrontational and questioning of an officer’s authority. Officer 3 lays much of this blame on the media and their coverage of law enforcement; “all they show is the bad stuff. There is no wonder why they hate us.” All five officers interviewed either made direct mention of, or alluded to, the media and politicians making law enforcement into the enemy and made people more likely to fear law enforcement than to trust them to help.



The subject of racism was raised by five officers. Each of these officers felt as though the media and even some politicians try to portray law enforcement as inherently racist and that causes the job to be even harder than it has to be because an officer is constantly worried if their actions will be seen as racist. The issue of law enforcement being, or at least being portrayed as, racist is one of the leading factors causing officers the most difficulty in doing their jobs and at the same time causing their jobs to be even more dangerous. The officers interviewed were unanimous in their belief that their own agencies, and law enforcement agencies in general, were the greatest hinderance to officers being able to do their jobs effectively, efficiently and safely. Each officer interviewed believed that the fear that agencies have that one of their officers may do something that would make the agency appear to be racist on some level, outweighs the agency's desire to do the job of law enforcement. Officer 11 said, "Agencies are policing scared because the media and politicians put all this racist crap out there and it is just not true, but agencies do not want to have to deal with it."

This fear of being labeled racist and the civil and public relations costs that come with it, is the main reason cited by the officers detailing why they feel that their own agencies are making their jobs more difficult. Two of the small agency officers used the phrase *hands tied behind our back* to describe how they have to go about their jobs, and four out of five believed the restrictions being placed on them is making their jobs more dangerous and difficult. Officer 3 and Officer 10 both commented on how on one hand agencies are holding officers back and on the other officers are scared to do their job for fear of being punished or sued. Officer 1 said, "It all boils down to trust. Officers do not trust their agencies. Agencies do not trust their officers, and the community does not trust law enforcement. It is a perfect storm that hurts all of us."

Table 15

Effects of Media Coverage and Political Rhetoric (Small Agency)

Effect	Number of Responses	Total %
Increased danger	5	100
Less proactive	5	100
Agency restrictions on officers	5	100
Labeled racist	4	80
Loss of trust in agency	5	100

**Large Agency**

Out of the large agency group, all six officers agreed that the media and political rhetoric had a large impact on officer safety and the overall difficulty of the job itself. While none of the officers said that media coverage or political rhetoric were directly causing the issues, they all agreed that each plays a large role in the overall scheme. Three of the officers stated that the media and politicians do a very poor job of providing the public with the facts, but rather just speak to, or present, issues in a way slanted towards their point of view or ideology. Officer 8 pointed out how many citizens are clueless as to what their rights are and only know what the headlines read. Four of the officers interviewed specifically stated that the media made law enforcement out to be *bad guys* and never fully explains situations or explains why law enforcement responded the way that they did. Officer 9 was very concerned that the media only focuses on the negatives of law enforcement and does not cover 90% of the positive things law enforcement does. Officer 4 laid the blame on anti-police politicians who only fan the flames of public distrust towards the police; “These anti-police, usually liberal, politicians get elected and all they do is trash talk the police and want to cut our funding. It is no wonder people are unhappy in this profession.”

Table 16

What Actions are the Media and Politicians Taking that is Impacting the Job of Law Enforcement Officers (Large Agency)

<u>Actions</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>	<u>Total %</u>
Misinformation	3	50
Negative portrayal	4	67
Portraying LE as racist	6	100
Lack of political support	6	100

In terms of officer safety, all officers interviewed believed that the constant negative media coverage makes an officer's already dangerous job, much less safe. Officer 9 was very blunt with their assessment of the media by saying, "they are not there to present information accurately, they are an entertainment industry and they only care about stirring the pot within the community," and Officer 6 called the media stories "lies." Officer 7 discussed how when answering a call for service today an officer gets surrounded by bystanders with their phones out recording hoping to catch the officer on camera doing something wrong so it can get put on the news. The biggest problem with this, according to Officer 7, is that when the officer is surrounded like that, they cannot keep an eye on everyone there and it increases the possibility of someone who wants to hurt or attack law enforcement of blending into the crowd. All officers interviewed either made direct mention of, or eluded to, the media and politicians making law enforcement into the enemy and made people more likely to fear law enforcement than to trust them to help.

One word that kept coming up in interview after interview was *racism*. All officers interviewed brought it up in one form or another. None of the officers interviewed felt as though law enforcement was inherently racist in how they go about their jobs or how they treat people.

Officer 8 was the only one to acknowledge that law enforcement has in the past been guilty of operating within a system rooted in slavery, particularly in the South before and during segregation. However, even while acknowledging the ugly history of some in law enforcement, Officer 8 does not feel that the system is like that anymore and that the majority of officers are not racist and the profession should not be painted as such. The largest issue with racism as Officer 6 sees it, is that the media try to “fan the flames of racism to create a greater divide between law enforcement and society.” Officer 6 is not alone in this assessment. Officers 4 and 9 each spoke of how the media and politicians inject race into many situations where it is not relevant, but they do so knowing that it will cause a negative public response and only serves to put officers in danger of physical harm and increased civil liability. All officers interviewed said that they felt like the public viewed them as being racist to some degree even though there was no basis for it other than what the media portrays.

The issue of law enforcement being, or at least being portrayed as, racist is one of the leading factors causing officers the most difficulty in doing their jobs and at the same time causing their jobs to be even more dangerous. The officers interviewed were unanimous in their belief that their own agencies, and law enforcement agencies in general, were the greatest hinderance to officers being able to do their jobs effectively, efficiently and safely. Each officer interviewed believed that the fear that agencies have that one of their officers may do something that would make the agency appear to be racist on some level, outweighs the agency’s desire to do the job of law enforcement. A total of four officers spoke of the fact that their administrations are telling officers to be more lenient in enforcing certain laws so that the public perception of the department will not be harmed. Officer 4 said that they personally were suspended for making an arrest that their agency felt made them look bad even though it was a valid felony

offense. Officers 7 and 9 both felt as though agencies have become so scared of being sued or having their image tarnished for their officers actually doing their job that the agencies no longer want to engage in proactive law enforcement. Four officers spoke about *having their hands tied* or *policing scared* to describe the restrictions placed on them by their agencies to try and minimize the risk of being sued or labeled as racist. Out of the six officers interviewed, three believed that these restrictions placed on officers and agency timidity are increasing the risk of officers being assaulted or targeted in the field.

These restrictions and fears are causing the officers to be hesitant in doing their jobs. Officer 7 spoke of how officers are not being as aggressive as they once were in doing their job for, not only fear of being sued, but for fear that they will be disciplined or terminated by their agency for doing their jobs. Five of the officers interviewed spoke of how officers are afraid of being *thrown under the bus* by their agencies which has led to officers only doing the bare minimum when they are working. Officer 4 admitted to no longer going out and being proactive in their enforcement actions. "I hate to admit it, but I no longer work traffic like I used to. I will still stop a drunk, but for most of my shift I try to find a quiet spot and hide." Officer 4 was not alone in this approach. Two of the other officers admitted to *just trying to get through the shift with as little trouble as possible*. The main reasons given for this reluctance to engage on a proactive level was the fear of not being supported by their agency if something were to go wrong, and micromanaging by administration where they question every action an officer takes. These conditions create fear in officers to do their job. Not fear of injury or death, but fear of being isolated and sacrificed by their agency which should be there to support their officers but instead see their officers as a liability and not an asset. Officer 4 lamented the current state of law enforcement and said, "gutless agencies protect themselves but make their officers expendable,"

and as Officer 7 put it, “no one trusts the agency to defend them if something major happens, even if they are totally in the right. So why even put yourself in that position?”

Table 17

Effects of Media Coverage and Political Rhetoric (Large Agency)

<u>Effect</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>	<u>Total %</u>
Increased danger	6	100
Less proactive	4	67
Agency restrictions on officers	6	100
Labeled racist	6	100
Loss of trust in agency	6	100

### Summary

This study set out to answer five research questions. The first two aimed to compare large and small agencies in terms of the number of officers planning on leaving the law enforcement profession as well as comparing the rate of burnout among officers in these departments. What was discovered is that there is in fact a difference between large and small agencies. Large  $p$  values, 0.370 for those planning on leaving the profession and 0.114 for burnout, typically allows for the rejection of the null hypothesis and suggests the size of the agency does impact an officer’s desire to leave the profession and their level of burnout. While the rate of burnout and secondary trauma between the two types of agencies was somewhat different, the greatest difference was found when comparing the number of officers planning to leave the profession. The percentage of officers in the study who had contemplated leaving the profession within the last year was almost the same, 58.8% for small agencies and 59% for large, the percentage of officers from large agencies who are planning on leaving the profession was much greater at 54.5% as compared to 35.3% for smaller agencies. The resulting 0.370  $p$  value is of statistical

significance and indicates that the size of the agency that an officer works for may have an impact on an officer's decision to leave the profession of law enforcement.

Research Question 3 asked why officers are leaving the profession. All of the officers who were interviewed stated that at one point or another they had thought about leaving the job, and one officer said they thought about it daily. The number one reason given for this was lack of pay and being understaffed. Officers felt that they were worked too hard and paid much less than they were worth. All officers interviewed felt that it is hard to recruit new officers given the low rate of pay on top of the difficulties of the job. Also, many of the officers reported feeling unappreciated by their own agencies which caused many to contemplate leaving the job. As for media and politics, officers were unanimous in their belief that the media and politics impact the number of officers leaving but that they were indirect causes rather than direct causes of officer attrition.

Research Question 4 focused on how media and politics impacts public support for law enforcement. The majority of the officers interviewed reported that the level of support that they received from their community has actually increased over the past few years and many attributed this to a kind of pushback against the constant negative media coverage and portrayal of law enforcement. While officers did say that the media, particularly social media, did impact public support and perception, the officers also blamed the profession of law enforcement as a whole for allowing this to occur by not pushing back on how the profession is being framed in the media. Many of the officers believed that law enforcement agencies should do more to explain why officers do what they do in order to dispel many of the incorrect assumptions that the public has about law enforcement.

The final research question looked at how media and politics is affecting officer safety and an officer's ability to do their job. The majority of the officers stated that they believed that their job has become less safe due to the constant negative media coverage and political rhetoric. Some believe that social media has caused many in society to be more concerned with trying to video an officer hoping to catch them doing something wrong rather than helping out or lending a hand when needed. The thing that was seen as having the greatest negative impact on officer safety and their ability to do their job is the prevailing media narrative of law enforcement being inherently racist. Officers stated that constantly being labeled racist, even when race has no factor in a given situation, only served to further divide the community and placed officers in a much more dangerous and difficult situation. This also leads officers to be more hesitant in doing their jobs for fear of civil or criminal charges stemming from an alleged use of excessive force or racially motivated incident. All of these factors combine to cause officers increased stress and increases the thoughts of leaving the profession.



## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

This study applied Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory to law enforcement by examining how the media and political rhetoric is impacting the support officers receive from the communities that they serve as well as the agencies that they work for, and how this support is impacting the number of officers leaving the profession. This chapter will focus on the conclusions drawn from the research and their implications or consequences for officers in the field and the agencies that employ them. A summary outlining the findings of each research question will be provided followed by a discussion of the study findings in relationship to the empirical and theoretical literature reviewed in Chapter Two. Afterwards a discussion to address the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the study will be provided as well. This chapter will conclude with a discussion of delimitations and limitations of the study followed by recommendations for future research.

### **Summary of Findings**

This study used a mixed methods approach in order to look beyond the numbers and aimed to gain a better understanding of the factors that are impacting law enforcement officers in how they are able to do their jobs and their decision-making process in terms of contemplating early retirement or leaving the profession. Research Question 1 and 2 served as the quantitative portion of the study and read as follows:

Research Question 1: How many officers working in small rural agencies that have been largely unimpacted by the recent civil unrest/riots that have occurred, as compared to agencies in large urban areas are either contemplating or have already decided to take early retirement or to leave the profession all together?

This hypothesis is proposed at a 95% confidence interval with a p-value of  $\leq 0.05$ . In the case that the p-value is  $< 0.05$  the null hypothesis will be rejected.

H<sub>0</sub>1. There is no statistical difference with early retirement between rural and urban police agencies.

H<sub>a</sub>1. There is statistically significant difference with early retirement between rural and urban agencies.

Research Question 2: How does the percentage of officers suffering from burnout or compassion fatigue differ between officers in rural and urban agencies?

The hypothesis is proposed at a 95% confidence interval with a p-value of  $\leq 0.05$ . In the case that the p-value is  $< 0.05$  the null hypothesis will be rejected.

H<sub>0</sub>2. There is no statistical difference with burnout between rural and urban police agencies.

H<sub>a</sub>2. There is statistically significant difference with burnout between rural and urban agencies.

The data collected from Research Question 1 was gathered through the ProQoL supplemental questions (Appendix B) which included the questions of whether the officer had considered leaving the profession within the past year and if that officer was indeed intending on leaving the profession in the near future. The small agency sample had a total of 17 (n=17) respondents while the large agency sample had a total of 22 (n=22) respondents. Respondents from the small agency sample in response to the question of whether they had contemplated taking early retirement or leaving the profession within the last year, a total of ten (10) said yes while seven (7) said that they had not contemplated it. When asked the follow up question about if they were planning on leaving the profession in the near future, six (6) said that they were in fact planning on leaving while eleven (11) said that they were not planning on leaving. In the large agency sample, in reference to the question of whether they had contemplated taking early

retirement or leaving the profession within the last year, a total of 13 said yes while only nine said no. When asked the follow up question about if they were planning on leaving the profession in the near future, 12 officers said yes that they were planning on leaving in the near future while 10 said they were not planning on leaving in the near future. The percentage of officers in the study who had contemplated leaving the profession within the last year was almost the same, 58.8% for small agencies and 59% for large. However, the percentage of officers planning on leaving that were included in the large agency sample was much greater at 54.5% as compared to 35.3% for smaller agencies. A t-test was conducted for this data which resulted in a p-value of 0.370. Typically, this size of p-value would result in the acceptance of the null hypothesis but given the low sample size it can only be stated that the data suggests that there is little difference in small rural agencies versus large urban agencies.

Data for Research Question 2 was gathered via the ProQoL survey which measures compassion satisfaction/fatigue, burnout, and secondary trauma. Both categories of agencies placed somewhere within the moderate range for all three variables. Both sized agencies placed in the higher moderate range, 38 for small and 37.5 for large, in terms of compassion satisfaction which means that there is no real compassion fatigue present within either group. The test for burnout again saw each sized agency fall within the moderate range with the small agency scoring average of 27.5 and the large agency average of 24. The large agency score of 24 placed on the very bottom of the moderate scale and bordered the low range which ends at 23. The final variable of secondary trauma had both sized agencies scoring in the moderate range, 26.7 for small agencies and 24.3 for large agencies. While both agencies consistently scored in the moderate range for all three variables, it is interesting to note that the scores for the large agency sample were consistently lower than the scores for the small agency sample. In addition, while

the scores for both agencies in all variables are relatively close, when we look back at RQ1 the large agency sample has a much higher percentage of officers who are planning on leaving the profession than are those who belong to a small agency. The t-test that was conducted resulted in a p-value of 0.114 for burnout and 0.328 for secondary trauma. Normally a p-value of this size would result in the acceptance of the null hypothesis but given the low sample size it can only be stated that the data suggests that there is little difference in small rural agencies versus large urban agencies.

Research Question 3 attempted to determine of those officers who are contemplating early retirement or leaving the profession, what are the driving factors behind these decisions, particularly how much of a role does the media and political rhetoric play in these decisions? Regardless of agency size the number one answer that was mentioned by all interview participants was the issue of pay. All of the officers interviewed listed low pay as the number one reason as to why officers are leaving the profession. The officers firmly believe that law enforcement officers are being over worked and under paid and that this is causing officers to become burned out and more likely to look for a better paying job. A contributing factor to the issue of pay was the issue of decreased staffing which is the reason that officers are having to work harder, take on more of a caseload, and work longer hours and thus increasing the rate of burnout. However, none of the officers interviewed listed the media or politics as a direct reason for officers leaving the profession. All officers agreed that both the media and political rhetoric/policies are contributing factors for officers leaving, but officers are not leaving just because of the media coverage or political issues.

Research Question 4 asked: as it relates to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory, how do officers describe the impact that media coverage and political rhetoric is having on the amount of

support officers receive from their agencies and the public/communities that they serve?

Interview participants from each sample group stated that for the most part the level of support that they receive from their communities has either increased or stayed the same over the past few years. One of the main reasons officers gave for this increased level of public support was that it was a pushback against the prevailing media narrative that the public does not support law enforcement. Some of the officers believed that this is the public's way of letting officers know that they are appreciated despite what the news tells them. Unfortunately, in terms of support from their agency, most officers reported that media coverage and political issues are having a negative impact on the level of support that officers are receiving from their employing agency. Most officers reported that their agencies have become so scared of negative media coverage and the potential of being sued that agencies are not going to support their officers and are willing to allow their officers to take the fall rather than support and defend them. This lack of support from law enforcement agencies results in an erosion of trust that officers have in their agency and thus leads officers to not be as proactive in doing their jobs due to fear of their agency not supporting them if they are involved in a major event such as an officer involved shooting or even a minor event that requires the use of force. The lack of support and loss of trust can cause officers to feel that they are all alone with no one to support them when they need it.

Research Question 5 asked, how is media coverage and political rhetoric impacting officer views on their overall safety and their ability to effectively do their job? All of the officers interviewed acknowledged that law enforcement is an inherently dangerous and difficult job but that the current climate surrounding law enforcement that is being driven by media coverage and political rhetoric is in fact making the job much more difficult and, in some cases, even more dangerous. In today's world where everyone has a cell phone with video capabilities,

officers reported being video recorded more often while doing their job. This can cause many issues for an officer such as increased scrutiny, inability to spot threats within crowds gathered near the scene, and creating a scenario where a bystander is more interested in filming an officer than rendering aid if an officer needs help. This leads to officers having to be even more aware of their actions, their words, and their surroundings which can cause even more stress on an officer. However, the greatest impact that the media and politics is having on an officer's ability to do their job is the effect that these things have on the law enforcement agency themselves. Officers continually mentioned that their agency, as well as law enforcement in general, is now policing *scared*, or policing *with their hands tied behind their back*. Some officers reported that their agency has even given instructions to not make arrests in some instances depending on the offense and the racial identity of the suspect because the agency is scared of the political and media fallout of such an event. This is causing officers distress as well as causing several to not want to do their job because they do not feel that their agency has their best interests at heart.

## **Discussion**

### **Theoretical**

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory has primarily been applied to the area of business and the impact that management style has on employee job satisfaction, happiness, and motivation (Stewart, Nodoushani, & Stumpf, 2018). Maslow's theory arranges a person's needs in a hierarchical fashion beginning with their physiological needs, such as food, water and shelter, and then progressing through safety, belonging/support, self-esteem and finally self-actualization. This study focused on level two, safety, and level three, belonging/support and how the media and political rhetoric is impacting these two aspects.

In terms of safety, this study found that among the officers interviewed, many felt as though their job has become more dangerous and that the media is playing a major role in that. The greatest concern among the officers is that there is a desire among those in the media and members of the public to try and get the next video of a police officer doing something wrong so that they can get more clicks or likes online. This leads to people more concerned about filming with their cell phones than in helping an officer when they need help. In addition, this desire to film officers creates situations where large crowds gather near officers at certain scenes and the officers believed that this could increase the chances of an officer being attacked or ambushed which agrees with the data presented by Bejan, Hickman, Parkin, and Pozo (2018).

The amount of, or level of, support that an officer receives directly impacts an officer's job satisfaction. Job satisfaction is one of the primary factors that determine whether an employee remains with an employer or seeks other employment regardless of profession (Chakravarti & Chakraborty, 2020). In this study most officers reported that they are satisfied with the job of law enforcement in and of itself, meaning that they still enjoy the job itself, but most were not satisfied with the agencies for which they worked. The most common reason that the officers gave as to why they were not satisfied with their agency is that they did not trust that the agency would support them, or have their back, if something serious were to happen or if they were accused of misconduct. Much like the data presented by Tomazevic and Aristovnik (2019), the level of officer trust in their supervisors and administrators is directly proportional to the level of job satisfaction. Officers taking part in this study reported that they do not feel supported by their agency and that it causes them to not enjoy their job as much and to also become less proactive in doing their job. Officers pointed to the agency's fear of negative media coverage and fear of civil litigation as the number one reason as to why agencies do not support

their officers like they should. Officers also fault their agencies for allowing the negative media narratives to go unchecked with little or no pushback to try and correct the narrative or to at least explain why an officer may have acted the way that they did. This lack of support causes poor morale and is another reason that the officers reported for looking for other places of employment.

One of the most interesting pieces of information gathered in this study was that the officers interviewed felt as though the community support for them has increased in many ways or at least stayed the same despite the constant media narrative that the public does not support law enforcement. Race is often a key issue that media stories tend to focus on which has resulted in many minorities, especially black males, having a very negative opinion of law enforcement (Nadal, et. al., 2017). It would then be logical for officers in this study to have reported that they received very little support from the minority community, but what was discovered is that the officers reported receiving a substantial amount of support from the minority community. In fact, several of the officers reported having great relationships with the minority community in their area. Officers identified those with very little knowledge about their rights as the group that seemed to have the most hostility and negativity towards law enforcement, and one officer specifically stated that white college students treated officers worse than any other demographic. Most of the officers interviewed credited the increase in public support to a pushback against the negative media coverage of law enforcement.

At the beginning of this study, it was proposed that law enforcement officers did not depend on their employers to help satisfy Maslow's highest level which is self-esteem or self-actualization. The reason is that the majority of officers are believed to already possess the personality traits that allow them to adapt to newfound challenges (Masood, Rafique, Qaisar, &



Musarat, 2017) which could be attributed to persons with higher levels of self-esteem. The study uncovered that self-actualization is in fact affected by the current conditions and challenges affecting law enforcement in that many of the officers reported that they do not see many opportunities for advancement. Officers believed that the current low staffing facing most departments, creates an environment where opportunities for promotion are becoming scarce which leads to poor morale among officers.

### **Empirical**

Officers are leaving the profession and that applications for new recruits are falling. The overall rate of new police officer applications has dropped severely with some agencies reporting over a 50% decline in new applications. The rate at which officers are leaving the profession vary from agency to agency and even country to country. Sweden for example has reported the rate that officers are leaving the profession has increased nearly 450% in the past five years (Andersson, Larsen, & Ramstrand, 2017). The data produced in this study supports the notion that officers are either planning on leaving the profession or they have at least seriously considered it. Out of the 39 total officers who took part in the survey 59% stated that they have seriously considered leaving the profession and 46% reported that they are planning on leaving the profession soon. When the data is broken down and looking at the rates from large urban agencies compared to smaller rural agencies it paints a much bleaker picture for the larger agencies in that 54.5% of these officers are planning to leave as compared to only 35.3% for smaller agencies.

The reasons given by the interviewed officers for why officers are leaving boiled down to two major topics. While the study focused on determining how media and politics are impacting officers' decisions to leave the profession, neither the media nor politics were among these top

two answers. Those interviewed named low pay and lack of trust in their agency's administration as the primary reasons that officers are leaving. Personnel shortages were also mentioned quite often but were seen as a byproduct of low pay. Media coverage and politics were mentioned as contributing factors for officers leaving, primarily in how these two factors impact agency support for their officers. High-stress professions, such as police work, require an increased level of support from supervisors to help minimize the level of physical and mental fatigue felt by officers (Anderson, Laresen, & Ramstrand, 2017). Previous studies suggests that law enforcement officers require a high level of trust in their fellow officers as well as command staff and those that report a higher degree of trust in their supervisors report a higher level of job satisfaction (Tomazevic & Aristovnik, 2019). In this study we find the inverse to be true. Officers in this study reported a very low level of trust in their agencies ability to support and defend the officers working there. As a result, the level of job satisfaction among the officers interviewed is rather low. Officers were unanimous in saying that the fear of negative media coverage is what is driving agencies to not support their officers in the way that officers feel necessary, and this lack of support is causing officers to feel alone, unhappy, and looking to find another job or career path. Additionally, those who remain are not as proactive as in the past for fear of being hung out to dry by their agencies so as a result the officers only do the minimum amount required and are not as aggressive in enforcing the law as they traditionally might have been.

## **Implications**

### **Theoretical**

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs states that an employee's primary needs such as safety and support must be taken care of first before any higher-level needs can be met. The result from this

study supports this basic principle of Maslow's in that support from the community as well as the officer's employing agency are crucial in an officer's job satisfaction level. Additionally, even though the traditional law enforcement personality has been found to allow officers to have high levels of self-esteem and the ability to handle many of the stresses of the job with limited impact to themselves (Jetelina, et al., 2020), the ability of officers to achieve the level of self-actualization through promotion and advancement has become limited. Job satisfaction rates among officers are suffering due to lack of support from their agencies. Previous research has reported that officers who report having low levels of trust in their supervisors also report a very low level of job satisfaction whereas officers who have a high degree of trust in their supervisors report a much higher level of job satisfaction (Tomazevic & Aristovnik, 2019). This study only reinforces these findings as the officers interviewed in this study do not trust their agencies to support or defend them, nor do they trust their local elected officials to do the same. Agencies are allowing negative media stories to go unchecked and elected officials often speak in negative terms when discussing law enforcement and do little to support them but are all too happy to quickly condemn officers for doing wrong even before all facts of an incident are made known. Officers see this type of behavior and are not willing to put their lives, and livelihoods, on the line if their agencies are just going to throw them under the bus and not defend them when they have done nothing wrong. Support and trust are crucial elements in helping officers deal with the stress of the job and when these two factors are either weak or non-existent, officers report feeling a loss of camaraderie and fidelity which results in officers becoming detached and increases their likelihood of leaving the profession (Parnaby & Weston, 2020).

Agencies must change their tactics and support their officers both in private and in public. Agencies need to start defending their officers from media attacks by presenting the

evidence and doing a better job in educating the public, and media, as to why officers do what they do. In other words, law enforcement agencies need to improve their messaging and be vocal advocates for their officers rather than just allowing media narratives to just go unchecked hoping that they will just go away.

### **Practical**

It was clear even before this study that law enforcement is facing some very difficult times in terms of officer retention and recruitment. This study only confirms this and sheds some light on how these struggles are facing various sized departments. Large agencies who took part in this study are facing extreme challenges considering 54% of officers surveyed are planning on leaving. Even the smaller agencies are facing an uphill battle with 35% planning on leaving. To put it into perspective, one of the agencies in the small agency sample only has 12 total road officers in their department that are divided into four squads working 12-hour shifts. If 35% of those officer leave that is one officer per squad leaving only two officers per shift to cover the entire county. This means officers cannot take vacation because the agency does not have sufficient coverage, when an officer calls out sick that leaves one officer working alone, and does not allow for any time of promotion opportunity.

To reverse this trend, or at least slow it, agencies need to develop strategies to deal with the identified issues. The first step would be to address the number one issue listed by officers and that is the low rate of pay. Agencies must work with their local governments to increase the level of pay for all their officers. Signing bonuses are a great incentive to encourage new officers to join but those officers that have been at the agency for long periods of time also need some type of tangible reward for staying with the agency and not just some certificate given to them as a thank you. Officers need to be given pay incentives for years of service, training, and

education. This provides officers with incentives to better themselves as well as helping the overall department to improve which in turn can help with retention of officers already employed and helps with the recruitment of new officers.

Additionally, agencies must become bigger advocates for their officers. This means that agencies need to publicly support and defend their officers, as well as allowing their officers to do their jobs. One phrase that was commonly heard from those officers interviewed was when talking about their agency, the officers described them as *policing scared*. It is natural for an agency to not want to have negative media coverage and to avoid being sued civilly. However, this risk avoidance cannot be so severe that officers feel as if they do not matter and that their agency cannot be trusted to be there when they need them. One possible suggestion is to engage the public primarily through social media to try and change the perception of law enforcement and use social media to educate the public on what the laws are as well as what rights citizens have. More people are now getting their news online and from social media than ever before (Schwartz, Yahav, & Silvertman, 2017), so by being proactive in the use of social media agencies can help change public perception while being more supportive of their officers. Agencies can also employ more training for their officers to help minimize the risk of liability and this training can be highlighted on social media further helping an agency's public image.

### **Delimitations**

Many decisions had to be made both prior and during this study. The first decision was to use a mixed methods approach. Mixed method design works on the assumption that by combining the strengths of both types, a greater understanding of the research problem or questions can be obtained (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It would have been very easy to simply administer the ProQoL survey to multiple agencies and get a statistical snapshot of the number of

officers who are thinking about or have planned to leave the profession, but numbers only tell a small part of the story. By using a mixed method approach it allowed for better analysis for the *reasons* why officers are leaving not just sheer numbers or percentages. A phenomenological study was chosen for the qualitative analysis portion of the study as it allows these individuals to interpret and derive meaning from their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The qualitative analysis portion of the study allowed officers to expand their answers from just identifying individual factors to describing how those factors worked together to impact officer decision making about their law enforcement future. This type of research provided much more in-depth data than simply having officers list, or rate, factors on a survey.

This study focused only on sworn law enforcement officers rather than criminal justice professionals overall. While detention officers, correctional officers, and non-sworn personnel might have their opinions on the topic, actual sworn law enforcement officers that are in the field dealing with the current conditions have a more unique perspective and that is the population that needed to be targeted for this study. The small rural agency participants were in western North Carolina because I have lived and worked in this area my whole life and had good relationships with the agencies involved. The large urban agency sample involved agencies in central North Carolina because western North Carolina does not really have any large urban areas.

### **Limitations**

There are two main limitations of this study and the first one is the study area. Since the study only looked at western and central North Carolina, generalizability could be limited. A similar study that incorporated more agencies in more states would greatly improve generalizability. However, given that law enforcement officers share many of the same

personality traits across the profession, it is believed that the results of this study can be applied of officers from other locations as well.

The other limitation of this study is the sample size. While the combined number of officers from all agencies involved were measured in the hundreds, only a small percentage of officers took part in the survey. The small agency sample had an approximate 27% response rate while the large agency sample only had an approximate 5% response rate to the survey. In addition, the number of officers who volunteered to take part in the interview portion of the study was not enough to allow for analysis comparing racial, gender, or tenure differences. A higher survey response rate as well as a larger interview pool would have made the findings easier to apply to other agencies outside of the study area. The small sample size, particularly in the survey portion of the study, raise concerns about selection bias, validity, and generalizability of the study.

### **Validity and Generalizability**

Given the low number of responses for both the initial survey as well as the one-on-one interviews, selection bias is a valid concern. Taking part in the survey and interview were both voluntary and therefore many potential participants chose not to participate. As noted above, the small agency sample had a 27% response rate whereas the large agency sample had an approximate 5% response rate. This makes the study subject to both self-selection and nonresponse bias. The low overall response rate and the substantial difference in response rates between the two sample groups does not allow for the results to be generalized across other groups who did not take part in the study. Research Questions 1 and 2 both proposed that the null hypothesis would be rejected if the p-value was  $< 0.05$ , which was not the case for either research questions. However, given the low response rate it is difficult to say with complete

confidence that the null hypothesis is accepted. Instead, it should be stated that the findings suggest that the size of the agency does not appear to have a significant impact on officer burnout and desire to leave the profession, rather than an outright acceptance of the null hypothesis.

In terms of the validity of the survey results, the survey remains valid. The ProQoL survey has been widely used in research with various helping professions and has shown to be valid and reliable (Stamm, 2010). In other words, the results of the survey are valid in terms of the results for the individual officers who participated in the survey. The issue at hand is attempting to apply the survey results to a wider population. While the individual scores are valid and applicable to the individual officer participating, the low sample size makes it harder to apply the results to a broader population of officers with absolute certainty.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study could be seen as a starting point to be expounded upon. It would be advantageous to expand this type of study to multiple states and jurisdictions with a greater number of possible participants. It would also be interesting to target certain states based on prevailing political ideologies. North Carolina is a predominately conservative state with the exceptions of some of the larger cities. If a study would break states down into liberal and conservative states an analysis could be done to determine if the political philosophies of the individual states impact officer job satisfaction and their desire to leave the profession.

The results from this study pointed to lack of trust as a major reason that officers are leaving the profession. Future studies could be designed to identify what specifically causes officers to distrust their agency. The study could also identify specific steps officers would like to see their agency take to re-establish trust. In addition to surveying and interviewing officers, members of the public could also be surveyed to gain the level of trust that they have in their



local law enforcement agency as well as steps that they would like to see the agency take to better serve the community and build trust between the agency and the citizens.

### **Summary**

This study set out to compare the level of burnout among officers in small rural law enforcement agencies and larger more urban agencies, to determine the role that media coverage and political rhetoric is having on officers leaving the profession, and how media coverage and political rhetoric are impacting how officers are able to do their jobs. Both large and small agencies scored in the median range of the ProQoL survey for burnout, secondary trauma, and compassion fatigue. The data also showed that there is a difference in the percentage of officers planning on leaving law enforcement between the two categories of agencies with a higher percentage of officers planning on leaving large agencies than small.

The data collected from officer interviews showed that media coverage and political rhetoric are having an impact on officers and their desire to leave the profession but not in a direct way. The number one answer given as to why officers are leaving the profession had nothing to do with neither the media nor politics. Low pay was the number one reason given for officers leaving. However, media and politics were reported as having a major impact on the other reason officers are leaving, and that is the loss of trust that officers have in their agencies. Negative media coverage, anti-law enforcement political statements and how agencies are responding to these issues were reported as major driving factors in why officers are losing trust in their agencies. Officers believe that agencies have become so scared of negative media coverage, and the political fallout that could ensue, that agencies are handcuffing their officers and not allowing their officers to be proactive. The most common phrase mentioned was that agencies are *policing scared*. Officers fear that their agencies will not support nor defend them if

they were to be involved in a major event such as an officer involved shooting or an excessive force complaint. This is causing officers to be less proactive and only doing the minimum amount of work required, as well as causing a major decline in officer morale and job satisfaction.

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## Appendix A: Professional Quality of Life (ProQoL) Scale

# Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL)

*Compassion Satisfaction and Compassion Fatigue (ProQOL) Version 5 (2009)*

When you *[help]* people you have direct contact with their lives. As you may have found, your compassion for those you *[help]* can affect you in positive and negative ways. Below are some questions about your experiences, both positive and negative, as a *[helper]*. Consider each of the following questions about you and your current work situation. Select the number that honestly reflects how frequently you experienced these things in the *last 30 days*.

1. I am happy.
2. I am preoccupied with more than one person I *[help]*.
3. I get satisfaction from being able to *[help]* people.
4. I feel connected to others.
5. I jump or am startled by unexpected sounds.
6. I feel invigorated after working with those I *[help]*.
7. I find it difficult to separate my personal life from my life as a *[helper]*.
8. I am not as productive at work because I am losing sleep over traumatic experiences of a person I *[help]*.
9. I think that I might have been affected by the traumatic stress of those I *[help]*.
10. I feel trapped by my job as a *[helper]*.
11. Because of my *[helping]*, I have felt "on edge" about various things.
12. I like my work as a *[helper]*.
13. I feel depressed because of the traumatic experiences of the people I *[help]*.
14. I feel as though I am experiencing the trauma of someone I have *[helped]*.
15. I have beliefs that sustain me.
16. I am pleased with how I am able to keep up with *[helping]* techniques and protocols.
17. I am the person I always wanted to be.
18. My work makes me feel satisfied.
19. I feel worn out because of my work as a *[helper]*.
20. I have happy thoughts and feelings about those I *[help]* and how I could help them.
21. I feel overwhelmed because my case *[work]* load seems endless.
22. I believe I can make a difference through my work.
23. I avoid certain activities or situations because they remind me of frightening experiences of the people I *[help]*.
24. I am proud of what I can do to *[help]*.
25. As a result of my *[helping]*, I have intrusive, frightening thoughts.
26. I feel "bogged down" by the system.
27. I have thoughts that I am a "success" as a *[helper]*.
28. I can't recall important parts of my work with trauma victims.
29. I am a very caring person.
30. I am happy that I chose to do this work.

**Appendix B: ProQoL Supplemental Questions**

1. Have you contemplated or thought about taking early retirement or simply leaving the profession within the last year?
2. Are you planning to retire, retire early, or leave the profession in the near future?
3. Current assignment (patrol, investigations, etc)
4. Years experience
5. Would you be willing to take part in future individual interviews for this study?
6. If you are willing to take part in these interviews please complete the following information:

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Appendix C: One-on-one Interview Questions**

1. Please introduce yourself and give a little information about your background.
2. What motivated you to begin a career in law enforcement?
3. What do you feel are the most rewarding aspects of being a law enforcement officer?
4. How have things changed since you first began your career?
5. What are the main factors that have caused these changes and how have they led or aided these changes?
6. How much support do you feel you get from the communities that you serve and has this level of support changed over the past few years?
7. If your level of support has changed what factors do you attribute to this and why?
8. How would you describe your level of satisfaction with your career as a law enforcement officer?
9. Describe your overall view of law enforcement today in terms of officer safety, public support, media coverage, and political discourse.
10. What are your feelings on the recent reports of an increased number of officers leaving the profession, and what do you think is driving them to leave the profession?
11. Have you thought about leaving the profession? Why or why not?
12. What is the largest obstacle that law enforcement, as a profession, is facing and how do you see things working out?
13. Discuss your view of how the media covers law enforcement and whether it has a positive or negative impact on law enforcement officers in general. Is the media playing a role in officers leaving the profession? How so?
14. Discuss your view of how political rhetoric locally and nationally is impacting how

officers do their jobs and what issues this rhetoric is creating or addressing. Do you think this rhetoric is causing officers to leave the profession? How so?

15. Thank you for your time and willingness to participate. I have one final question, is/are there any question(s) that you think should have been asked or is there anything that you would like to add to what we have discussed?

## **Appendix D: Summary of Interview Answers**

The following is a brief outline of the major points or quotes given by officers to interview questions 4 through 15. The responses obtained from small agencies are presented first, followed by those from large agencies. Officers 1, 2, 3, 10 and 11 are responsible for the responses listed in the small agency category. Officers 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 are responsible for the responses listed in the large agency category.

### **Question 4: How have things changed since you first began your career?**

#### **Small Agency**

- body camera footage often spun up by media, law enforcement was seen as untrustworthy but cameras have proven the opposite and are a benefit to officers
- in office politics have greatly changed
- new people moving in creating new problems
- changed a lot, more population, more crime, no down time
- it is not like it used to be
- politics has gotten much worse
- we are policing scared

#### **Large Agency**

- more progressive, anti-police
- administration used to take care of us, hardworking and aggressive but no sense of belonging now and lack of support from the administration
- hands have become tied more and more via laws or department policies
- hands tied behind our backs by politicians
- media is growing much more negative
- change in morality
- much more short staffed
- recruiting is down and staffing levels are extremely low
- increased protests and increased blatant disrespect for the law and law enforcement
- our focus as a profession has changed
- not the same level of public trust as there used to be

### **Question 5: What are the main factors that have caused these changes and how have they led or aided these changes?**

#### **Small Agency**

- advances in technology benefits law enforcement
- changes in the make-up of the community and political shifts
- riots, COVID, and the news portraying cops as being bad

- generational change, moral shifts in society, drug use
- politics, media, lawsuits, lack of training, social media

### **Large Agency**

- media coverage
- risk aversion
- gutless departments protect themselves but officers are expendable
- changing philosophies, public and political pressures
- negative media coverage
- political agenda which lies about law enforcement being racist
- low pay
- people are scared to get into law enforcement due to liability risk, low pay, negative public image
- social media having a huge negative impact
- society becoming more opinionated, media portrayal of law enforcement playing a large role
- law enforcement's reluctance to change
- societal change
- education has devolved to people being taught what to think rather than how to think

**Question 6: How much support do you feel you get from the communities that you serve and has this level of support changed over the past few years?**

### **Small Agency**

- after 9/11 everyone was unified, now with cases like George Floyd serve only to divide us, with the media trying to stir the pot
- do get an occasional thank you from community member but most will not help you if you are in trouble
- they do not want to see you until they need you
- not much change, maybe even more support
- hear thank you more often
- a lot of support from this community

### **Large Agency**

- good amount but less than before
- supporters outnumber detractors
- community support has increased with more people going out of their way to say thank you even though the news media tries to say there is no support
- support has increased over the past two years, a minority number of people at the police
- universities are teaching students to hate or, at least, distrust the police

- support has stayed pretty much the same but supporters are becoming more vocal in their support
- support depends on the community
- support is pretty much the same, they only want us when they need us

**Question 7: If your level of support has changed what factors to you attribute to this and why?**

#### **Small Agency**

- the public wants information now and they apply their own truth
- the media drives a narrative and feeds that narrative
- the public does not understand their rights or the law
- media makes us the bad guys
- no real change among the native population, but those moving in are more complex
- media coverage of recent events caused a social backlash and led to more support
- recent events and media portrayal of law enforcement has caused people rally behind law enforcement

#### **Large Agency**

- Americans generally have less civic duty than in the past
- the public realizes what they see on the news is not accurate
- people are realizing that the reality does not match the media narrative
- negative media portrayal
- societal change, poor teacher quality, and too much information available and most is not accurate or correct

**Question 8: How would you describe your level of satisfaction with your career as a law enforcement officer?**

#### **Small Agency**

- would not trade this job for anything
- 10 out of 10
- I feel stuck
- I am satisfied and feel like I make a difference
- I am pretty satisfied

#### **Large Agency**

- I love it and hate it, but the negative is starting to outweigh the positive.
- Some stuff I do not like but generally satisfied.

- I enjoy my position but I am not satisfied with the politics within the department and politics in general.
- My satisfaction depends on the day, but overall I would rate it at a five or six.
- Four out of five for the most part but each day is different.
- I am happy with the profession but not happy with my department.

**Question 9: Describe your overall view of law enforcement today in terms of officer safety, public support, media coverage, and political discourse.**

#### **Small Agency**

- there is an inherent risk in this job and the public recognizes this risk, our communities appreciate us, the media makes the public question law enforcement, the public is ignorant of their rights and the media takes advantage of this, the media creates distractions rather than focusing on the problem
- the media makes our jobs harder, and the ideology they are pushing makes us less safe
- changing and increasing population makes the job harder
- body cameras have made things safer
- makes our job harder and less safe, constant negativity makes it harder to be able to do our job

#### **Large Agency**

- media and politics are powerful factors
- more dangerous now
- I am ashamed of what law enforcement has become.
- the job is much less safe today and we are seeing more outright defiance from those we interact with
- the job is much less safe and much more difficult
- morale is down and anti-police District Attorneys are making things worse
- job is much harder and we are under much more scrutiny and causes us to walk on eggshells
- Most people in the community respect and appreciate law enforcement, but many councilmen do not respect law enforcement causing officers not to respect them.
- The media makes things worse, it makes us less safe by only presenting one side of any given situation.
- people think that politicians are smart but they are not

**Question 10: What are your feelings on the recent reports of an increased number of officers leaving the profession, and what do you think is driving them to leave the profession?**

#### **Small Agency**



- the media hurts law enforcement but we have allowed this and conditioned them to it, boils down to a lack of trust
- lack of support from the community and your own agency, agencies will hang you out to dry to satisfy the public
- most officers around here do not leave the profession, they just change agencies
- recent events, negative media, toxic leadership, and low pay
- low pay, lack of respect, administration does not have your back, attitude of the younger generation

### **Large Agency**

- no longer a wise decision to stay
- sense of being needed is gone
- most seasoned officers are merely riding the clock, and some are even outright quitting even with many years of service and rank
- internal forces are pushing them out
- younger officers just want a job which decreases the morale of older officers, and the pay sucks
- low pay and toxic environments are causing officers to leave
- low pay, poor administration, and self-selection are the main reasons officers leave
- people do not leave jobs, they leave poor managers
- greater focus on punishing officers than rewarding good officers

### **Question 11: Have you thought about leaving the profession? Why or why not?**

#### **Small Agency**

- I have thought about leaving for other callings.
- I have not thought about leaving.
- I think about leaving all the time due to low pay, but stay due to lack of options.
- Yes, I think about leaving and I feel burned out most of the time, but I have switched shifts and that has helped to a degree.
- I have thought about leaving to try and make more money and try something new.

#### **Large Agency**

- I think about leaving all the time but I am too far in.
- I have thought about it but have no real desire to leave, but would retire today if I could.
- I have seriously considered leaving within the last six months due to micro managing within the department and trust issues that I have with the command staff.
- I think about leaving every day.
- I feel stagnant and no room for advancement.

- I think of leaving quite often but do not because of my family.
- I honestly think about quitting every day.

**Question 12: What is the largest obstacle that law enforcement, as a profession, is facing and how do you see things working out?**

**Small Agency**

- Success takes clear and open communication and being part of the community, communication will help to change public perception.
- Bad public relations and image, will keep going to crap.
- We are so divided as a nation I do not see us ever getting back to what we used to be.
- Lack of manpower and it is getting worse.
- Low pay and lack of recruitment, also the court system.

**Large Agency**

- Morale is extremely low and we are working with only 30-40% staffing.
- Things will get worse until we finally collapse.
- The lack of hiring is our largest problem and may get better if the economy gets worse.
- The media and politicians are making things much worse.
- We are in a major crisis mode in terms of hiring and until a major pay upgrade is implemented it is not going to get any better.
- Staffing and recruiting are our largest obstacles and will worsen before it gets better.
- low pay and lack of recruiting, law enforcement needs a “Top Gun” moment in order to increase recruitment
- Recruitment and retention are down because the idea of law enforcement being racist is constantly being pushed even when race plays no role in a given situation.

**Question 13: Discuss your view of how the media covers law enforcement and whether it has a positive or negative impact on law enforcement officers in general.**

**Small Agency**

- media coverage can ruin an officer’s career, especially in a small area
- media magnifies negative feelings about officers
- media is not playing a direct role in officers leaving but does play an indirect role
- major negative impact, makes officers scared to do their job
- it depends on the outlet but overall very negative and puts too much of the spotlight on the bad of the profession and does not cover the good

- it depends on the outlet but all are biased one way or the other
- media is causing officers to leave to an extent
- overwhelmingly negative causing officers to dwell on the negative, definitely plays a role in officers leaving

### **Large Agency**

- The media has an enormous negative impact and are not properly informing the public.
- The media is generally negative and causes a small percentage of officers to leave, politics has a larger impact.
- The media is very negative but only indirectly causing officers to leave.
- Constant negativity makes an already difficult job even harder.
- The media does not directly cause officers to leave but does cause the public to question law enforcement's legitimacy and makes the job harder which causes some to leave.
- Only negative coverage which leads many to leave.

**Question 14: Discuss your view of how political rhetoric locally and nationally is impacting how officers do their jobs and what issues this rhetoric is creating or addressing.**

### **Small Agency**

- political rhetoric plays an indirect role in officers leaving
- can be very disheartening for officers, but can also cause them to up their game
- makes the public think that we are villains instead of helpers
- why stay if they hate you
- it creates misperceptions and it is all about public image and not results
- personal politics within the department is definitely impacting us and is definitely playing a role in officers leaving
- liberals are more critical while conservatives are more supportive, but politics is not causing people to leave in our department
- makes the job harder and is causing officers to leave

### **Large Agency**

- Political rhetoric is pushing officers out.
- Causes officers to not be proactive and become just call takers.
- Pushing good officers out the door.
- Politics hurts hiring more than retention.
- Departments should fight back more.
- Like the media, politics indirectly causes officers to leave but has a major impact on recruiting in that it causes people to not want to be the police.
- Politicians do not know what they are talking about which leads to bad policies and pushes good officers out.

- Political rhetoric is not directly causing officers to leave but does play a part in the decision making process.
- Politics does not impact officers leaving as much as the media does.
- Officers see politicians as puppets.

**Question 15: Is/are there any question(s) that you think should have been asked or is there anything that you would like to add to what we have discussed?**

**Small Agency**

- questions about leadership and policy

**Large Agency**

- Officers feel that they have to keep their mouth shut.
- We get good feedback from minorities, but white college students treat us the worst.
- We need quality leadership.
- If money were no object, would you stay?

## **Appendix E: Consent to Participate in Research Project**

### **Consent to Participate in Research Project**

My name is Allen Denny and I am a doctoral candidate at Liberty University. To earn a doctoral degree (PhD), candidates must complete a research project, better known as a dissertation. The topic of my research project is MEDIA, POLITICS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT: HOW THE CURRENT POLITICAL CLIMATE AND MEDIA COVERAGE IS LEADING TO FEWER LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS IN THE FIELD.

The purpose of this study is to compare the percentage of officers considering early retirement or leaving the profession in small rural agencies as compared to larger more urban agencies, and to identify what factors are leading to these officers leaving, particularly the role of media coverage and political climate. I am respectfully asking for your participation in this research project because your thoughts, feelings, and perceptions as a law enforcement officer are key to the success of this research.

#### **Procedures**

Participants will be asked to complete a short survey that measures officer burnout and compassion fatigue. Participants will be asked at the conclusion of the survey if they would be willing to complete a face-to-face interview that would be conducted in person or via Zoom.

#### **Benefits and Risks**

This research project provides no known risks if you chose to participate. No cost exists for participating in this research. The information you provide will assist me with identifying how many officers are contemplating leaving the profession and understanding the forces that are pushing them towards this decision. The information collected may not benefit you directly, but what I learn from this research could provide benefits to students, institutions, community partners, and future law enforcement officers.

#### **Privacy**

You and your responses will remain anonymous. If you decide to participate in this research study, synonyms will be used to identify participants, such as A or B. No one can identify you, nor determine the agency for which you work. No one will know whether you participated in this study.

#### **Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. Participants are protected from bias and discrimination if they decline to participate in this study. Participants can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty and with assured confidentiality.

## Confidentiality

During this research project, all data will be kept in a secure location. Only my Liberty University Advisor and I will access this data. The final report will not contain any names. All participants will receive a designation as A, B, C etc. to protect the privacy and confidentiality of all the participants to the extent allowed by the law.

If you have any questions about this research study, then please call me at [REDACTED] or email me at [REDACTED].

If you agree to participate in this project, please sign and date the signature page and return it to: Allen Denny, Principal Investigator.

Thank you,

Allen D Denny Jr

Signature:

I have read and understand the information provided to me regarding my participation in this research study. *MEDIA, POLITICS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT: HOW THE CURRENT POLITICALCLIMATE AND MEDIA COVERAGE IS LEADING TO FEWER LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS IN THE FIELD.*

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I \_\_\_\_\_ agree to participate in  
(Print Your Name)

this research study.

### Please check the box that applies:

I agree to participate in this research project.

I do not agree to participate in this research project.

My signature below indicates that I agree to participate in this research study.

Printed Name:

Signature:

Date:

Telephone:

Email: