

UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS  
UTILIZING EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS AFTER CRITICAL INCIDENTS

by

Lovetta Quinn-Henry

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological research was to understand and describe the lived experiences of Central Florida law enforcement officers who utilized an employee assistance program (EAP) following a critical incident. Law enforcement professionals exposed to critical workplace incidents are often referred to an EAP for their mental health. The problem is that law enforcement officers severely underutilize the available services offered by an EAP, even after critical incidents when the support is urgently needed. Piaget's work is underpinned by McCann and Pearlman's constructivist self-development theory guiding the study. The theory asserts that individuals draw from their experiences to shape their reality, thus creating a worldview used to understand traumatic experiences associated with stigmas, apprehensions, and beliefs utilizing EAPs after critical incidents. The researcher conducted Zoom interviews with 11 participants; 13 semistructured questions were asked to gather rich data to answer the central research question and two subquestions. A critical analysis of the interviews led to the identification of five major themes: (a) EAP is not effective, (b) intervening factors influence the relationship between incidents and outcomes, (c) change in law enforcement officers' beliefs and behaviors after the critical incident, (d) barriers associated with EAP services, and (e) potential for EAPs and other service providers.

*Keywords:* employee assistance program (EAP), constructivist self-development theory, critical incidents, cultural competency

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### **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to the brave men and women in law enforcement who participated in this research. Your commitment to protecting and serving the community and upholding justice is admirable. By sharing your experiences and truths, you have made an invaluable contribution to advancing our understanding of the law enforcement profession. Your participation was essential to my academic endeavor's success, and I am genuinely grateful for that. I sincerely hope that the findings presented herein will be beneficial in supporting and improving the noble work you do every day.

Last but certainly not least, to my heartbeats, I appreciate your love and support throughout this academic journey. Your presence at every milestone, allowed me to stand tall and proud. I love you always and forever.

### **Acknowledgments**

First and foremost, I give thanks to my Savior, Jesus Christ. My soul is anchored because of His grace and mercy. “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” I will live one day at a time, enjoy one moment at a time, and take this world as it is and not as I would have it, trusting that You will make all things right if I surrender to You.

I am most thankful for my committee members’ invaluable guidance throughout the dissertation process. I greatly appreciate their willingness to share their time and professional expertise. I want to thank Dr. Finck, my committee chair, for his unwavering support and encouragement. His recognition of my achievements along this journey has been truly motivating.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Constructivist self-development theory (CSDT)

Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI)

Coronavirus Disease of 2019 (COVID-19)

Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM)

Department of Justice (DOJ)

Employee assistance program (EAP)

Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR)

Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE)

Fraternal Order of Police (FOP)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Special weapons and tactics (SWAT)

United States (U.S.)

World Health Organization (WHO)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

Choosing a career in law enforcement is noble and rewarding for individuals who want to serve others, especially during public mistrust (Blumberg et al., 2018). Unfortunately, there is a hidden cost when choosing a profession in law enforcement due to constant exposure to critical incidents (Civilotti et al., 2021). Researchers report that the demands of the law enforcement profession can take a toll on officers' mental health (Blumberg et al., 2020; Bonner & Crowe, 2022). Blumberg and Papazoglou (2019) revealed that law enforcement officers who frequently respond to critical incidents develop emotional and psychological signs of stress. Civilotti et al. (2021) opined that daily exposure to traumatic events results in emotional and physical stress on officers. Johnson et al. (2019) explained that comforting grieving people after a tragic death, assisting accident victims, and listening to recounted stories of horrific events may result in avoidance and reduced capacity to care for others. Ondrejková and Halamová (2022) highlighted the importance of researchers seeking the experiences of police officers. Additional research explains that organizational and operational stressors will lead the officers to exhibit compassion fatigue, burnout, and moral injury (Basinska & Daderman, 2019; Foley & Massey, 2020; Jamieson et al., 2020; Jetelina, Beauchamp, et al., 2020; Papazoglou, Blumberg, et al., 2020; Papazoglou, Marans, et al., 2020). Johnson et al. (2019) reported that stress is the expected reaction to threatening situations; however, prolonged exposure to traumatic events can be problematic.

Fewer quantitative studies have explored law enforcement officers' use of employee assistance programs (EAPs; Regehr et al., 2019). However, even fewer qualitative studies addressed officers' perspectives of EAPs after critical incidents (Hsu et al., 2020; Perry & Cayer,

1992). Hsu et al. (2020) highlighted the challenges in developing EAPs in the last decade due to the need for a valid instrument to establish the programs' effectiveness. Hsu et al. suggested future research to access EAP outcome indicators. Edgelow et al. (2021) recommended expanding research on mental health intervention programs, such as EAPs, for police. Therefore, this current study fills the gap in the literature through the exploration of the lived experiences of law enforcement officers who used an EAP after a critical work incident.

In this study, interviews with law enforcement officers were conducted to obtain their perspectives and experiences with EAP services and to answer the research questions. Furthermore, the research outcomes may raise awareness among community members, law enforcement leaders, policymakers, and officers about effective strategies to promote resilience among law enforcement personnel to mitigate and prevent mental distress and injury (Papazoglou, Blumberg et al., 2020; Papazoglou & Chopko, 2019; Ramchand et al., 2019; Richards et al., 2021). Understanding officers' beliefs and thoughts about EAP programs will give more insight into their thoughts about using mental health services to aid them in being at their best to serve society, their communities, and sustainable careers.

This transcendental phenomenological study provides readers with a thorough understanding of the lived experiences of law enforcement officers who used EAP after a critical incident. The research contributes to the literature by adding the lived experiences of law enforcement officers who used EAP after a critical incident in Central Florida. Understanding the officers' lived experiences, concerns, and attitudes toward using an EAP for stressful issues allows law enforcement administrators to examine their agency's existing policies to consider providing additional resources that address mental health concerns inherent to police work and the impact on their officers' cost of caring. Greater insight into law enforcement officers'

perspectives on EAPs is essential to improve the program's utilization and mitigation of vicarious trauma (Lockey et al., 2021).

### **Background**

Law enforcement officers worldwide have provided peacekeeping enforcement since the 1800s (Conser et al., 2011). While serving on the frontline, officers give the communities patrolling services, traffic control, criminal investigations, mental health services, and copious responses to emergency calls for assistance (Dutton, 2019). The job demands expose officers to traumatic events, which places them at higher risk of developing vicarious trauma reactions such as burnout, compassion fatigue, and moral injury (Agelidis, 2020; Richards et al., 2021). These vicarious traumatization outcomes negatively impact the officers' mental health and job performance if they are not adequately addressed (Richards et al., 2021; Velazquez & Hernandez, 2019). Society expects law enforcement officers to perform the duties outlined in their job descriptions without hesitation (Mumford et al., 2021; U.S. Department of Justice, 2020). Split-second, life-or-death decisions profoundly impact officers' beliefs and personalities (Griffin et al., 2019; Haberfeld, 2016; Papazoglou, Koskelainen et al., 2019; Violante et al., 2016). Their stress responses to critical incidents are vital to their job performance.

Bouzikos et al. (2022) explained that organizations use EAPs to help employees deal with psychological stress-related concerns. Nevertheless, Bouzikos et al.'s research indicated that the approach could be more effective because it ignores the context of the specific law enforcement officers' issues. Newell et al. (2022) expounded how EAPs offer various services, including stress management. Ceka and Ermasova (2021) supported employing organizational EAP contracts to assist law enforcement officers with issues affecting their mental and emotional well-being. Unfortunately, only 22% of the officers Ceka and Ermasova surveyed were willing



to use the services. While officers agree that psychological services are needed, many do not pursue the benefits due to stigma, beliefs regarding confidentiality, and mental health providers not understanding the police profession (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019). Most often, law enforcement professionals exposed to traumatic workplace incidents are referred to EAP by their agencies to address stress-related issues (Bouzikos et al., 2022; Jetelina, Beauchamp et al., 2020). Officers often have concerns about what is reported to their supervisors; therefore, they are not forthcoming with EAP counselors about their issues. Cultivating trust with the counselors requires the officers to be vulnerable about their experiences, and many are reluctant to do so.

Historically, other studies have thoroughly explained the inherent mental health stressors that occur from long-term exposures to traumatic events while performing the duties of a police officer (Blumberg & Papazoglou, 2019; Bowers et al., 2020; Richards et al., 2021). Some researchers explored more substantial and resilient officers serving their communities and stressed the significance of understanding their experiences with critical incidents to address stress-related issues inherent to police work adequately (Branson, 2019; Papazoglou, Marans et al., 2020; Tuttle et al., 2019).

### **Situation to Self**

As a law enforcement officer who has experienced traumatic events and utilized numerous resources, including EAP, a familiarity exists that helps to identify the scope and depth of the available services. The researcher's experiences comprise a diverse criminal justice career spanning 31 years in the field, including working law enforcement positions that include probation and patrol, correctional officer, and current position as deputy chief of police in a major city department.

As an executive leader, it is critical to the organization's mission to support the law enforcement officers' needs to maintain superior mental and physical fitness. The top-down support encourages them to perform their duties. Mental alertness and wellness are fundamental to officers' success and ability to utilize their agency-issued equipment successfully. Over the last decade, law enforcement agencies have demonstrated their support for mental wellness by investing in their officers' mental fitness to ensure they sufficiently enforce law and order within their communities. Police executives are duty-bound to provide resources that ensure officers are emotionally fit.

Utilizing wellness programs is vital and is a shared responsibility of the individual employee, and their department leaders must support it. Empowering officers to seek help when they suffer stress and other factors affecting their job performance is paramount. The higher-ranking officers can influence the use of wellness programs by sharing their experiences and assuring others that they will not be viewed as a risk to the agency for seeking help; openly supporting resources and officers exploring mental health resources can eliminate the fear of stigmas for officers who seek help.

As a 16-year veteran member of the Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) team, which supports officers after a significant event, the researcher has assisted countless officers during difficult times, including critical incident debriefings. Having served as the team's commander, overseeing the frequency of peer support provided by team members and sharing valuable resources with officers, this researcher witnessed officers' reactions to the mental health referrals or suggestions of consulting with their EAPs. The researcher was motivated by the study's quest to provide an opportunity for officers to give a firsthand account of their experiences with EAPs and their beliefs about the services. Based on the officers' testimonies

and experiences, the study provides intimate aspects about the EAP for fellow law enforcement officers, agency executives, and political stakeholders. The researcher believes that as a law enforcement leader, there is an obligation to share the study's findings to add value to the profession. The researcher believes the most valuable part of the study was uncovering the officers' experiences, beliefs, and views about the EAP after a critical incident. Understanding law enforcement officers' EAP accounts may impact officers' retention and reduce citizen complaints (Hofer & Rineer, 2023). As it becomes more challenging to recruit qualified candidates, employee retention becomes increasingly vital for law enforcement leaders (C.O. Daniel, 2019). Providing the most appropriate mental wellness resources will have a far-reaching impact on the development of stable guardians who nurture positive community relationships, create trust, and produce equitable outcomes for the benefit of all (Hofer & Rineer, 2023).

### **Interpretive Framework**

This study incorporated an interpretive framework to reveal the realities of the participants' human experiences with the real world. A social constructivism worldview was used to properly clarify law enforcement officers' perspectives, perceptions, and thoughts of the EAP after a critical event. The study relied on the participants' views of the phenomena. Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that singular factors may not be sufficient depending on the situation. Therefore, numerous participant contributions were included; however, the researcher was sure to avoid overlooking individual concerns. The essences were used to capture the feelings of law enforcement officers toward the EAP, a social constructivist approach that aids in implementing different techniques that include interview data collection. Capturing the pure experiences of law enforcement officers' emotions was disadvantaged due to the professional culture of not being open to discussing their feelings, concerns, and realities. The researcher

remained sensitive to the officers' positions when they shared their perspectives through their lenses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researchers understood that officers construct their realities through their perceptions of their experiences (Roberts et al., 2022). Adopting a psychological concept of the self as the officers navigate the law enforcement cultural conditions was essential to this study.

### **Ontological Assumption**

The study's philosophical assumption relates to the ontological assumption as it served to bring to light the multiple stated realities of law enforcement participants' lived experiences with the EAP (Creswell & Poth, 2024). The participants shared their personal stories through one-on-one interviews with the researcher. According to Moustakas (1994), a phenomenological study shows how participants can view their experiences with a phenomenon differently. The central concept of transcendental phenomenology is referred to as noema, the experienced phenomenon, and noesis, how the phenomenon is experienced. Moustakas explained it as "not the real object but the phenomenon, not the tree but the appearance of the tree" (p. 24). Each tree is unique to each participant's life experiences, the position of the lights, and the angles from which they are seen (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Axiological Assumption**

The study's axiological assumption is critical to the researcher's review of the phenomenon. The researcher is a senior law enforcement officer with personal experiences that formed a belief about EAPs. However, as Moustakas (1994) revealed, epoché, the process of clearing one's mind, space, and time to capture the experiences of others, was essential for this researcher to remain aware of personal biases. Throughout the study, the researcher did not assume any position on the topic; instead, the researcher allowed space for new ideas, feelings,

and understanding to occur through the lens of the participants. Husserl (1970) asserted that the researcher must carry out the legitimacy and reality of the participant's truths. As a result, the axiological assumption illuminates the researcher's involvement.

### **Problem Statement**

Law enforcement officers face immense pressures and are frequently exposed to trauma throughout their careers serving and protecting the public. Critical incidents that elicit strong emotional reactions that potentially interfere with their job performance are an unavoidable reality of police work (Carleton et al., 2019). Over time, repeated exposures to trauma such as shootings, homicides, traffic fatalities, being physically attacked, or deadly force encounters lead to concerning rates of depression, suicide, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Violanti et al., 2019). EAPs can provide vital mental health support and resources to assist law enforcement officers in processing trauma healthily. The problem is that law enforcement officers underutilize the available services offered by EAPs, even after critical incidents when the support is urgently needed (Jetelina, Molsberry, et al., 2020).

Without adequate support, continued exposure to trauma can lead to burnout, compassion fatigue, moral injury, and other mental health-related stressors throughout the officers' careers (Blumberg, 2020; Hofer & Rineer, 2023; Papazoglou & Chopko, 2017). A survey conducted in Dallas, Texas, indicated that 26% of the officers screened were positive for mental illness symptoms issues within the preceding two weeks, and 17% of the participants used mental health services within the past 12 months. Still, only 7.66 % were interested in using mental health provider services due to thoughts of self-harm (Jetlina, Molsberry, et al., 2020). The researchers formed focus groups with 18 officers, which revealed the officers believed the mental health services lacked confidentiality, officers were concerned about the stigmas for seeking treatment,

they felt that providers could not relate to the law enforcement occupation, and officers did not recognize when to ask for assistance (Jetelina, Molsberry, et al., 2020).

Stigmas surrounding mental health in the law enforcement culture pose a significant barrier to accessing services (Grupe, 2023; Krakauer et al., 2020). Confidentiality concerns about repercussions to their career if they disclose their struggles also prevent officers from asking for help (Papazoglou, Marans et al., 2020). Overall, there is a lack of research that addresses law enforcement officers' lived experiences and perspectives toward using EAPs in the aftermath of a critical incident.

Law enforcement officers experience significant mental health stressors, including vicarious traumatization that manifests as burnout, compassion fatigue, and moral injury. Few existing research studies have been conducted to understand the law enforcement officers' experiences using EAPs for mental health stressors inherent to their jobs (Bonner & Crowe, 2022; Lucia & Halloran, 2020). Improving EAP is vital to officer wellness and job performance, but significant knowledge gaps exist regarding officer experiences and decision-making regarding accessing adequate services after trauma exposure. The specific problem supports the need for this study to give a voice to law enforcement officers concerning their beliefs and thoughts about using an EAP after a critical incident.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand law enforcement officers' perspectives and experiences using an EAP after critical incidents. Overall, mental health programs for law enforcement serve to prevent vicarious trauma outcomes such as burnout, compassion fatigue, and moral injury following exposure to critical incidents (Bouzikos et al., 2022; Mumford et al., 2021). In this research, law enforcement officers' experiences using

EAP services were generally defined as those of retired and active-duty officers who have experienced critical work incidents. Bouzikos et al. (2022) discovered that organizations typically contract their mental wellness services through an EAP to support employees facing psychological challenges. In addition, Bouzikos et al. found that EAPs primarily concentrate on the individual and may not influence the root cause of the employee's work-related problems. EAPs are commonly used to address PTSD, anxiety, depression, and mental and behavioral health for employees. The effectiveness of EAP services is not consistently measured, leaving the program's successes misunderstood (Langlieb et al., 2021). Factors that led to the officers' confusion resulted from inconsistent services, the availability of appropriate resources, and employee utilization rates.

Additionally, military veterans' mental health problems have been studied exhaustively, but knowledge is scarce regarding police officers (Blumberg & Papazoglou, 2019; Papazoglou Blumberg et al., 2020; Papazoglous, Marans et al., 2020; Papazoglou et al., 2022). The U.S. Department of Justice (2020) supported the significance of maintaining healthy law enforcement officers for the success of law enforcement actions. A recent study highlighted the need for mental health programs to assist law enforcement officers in accomplishing their duties (Mumford et al., 2021). Bouzikos et al. (2022) revealed the critical consequences of needing to understand law enforcement experiences using EAPs. At a broader level, it is necessary to change the problematic heroic-warrior culture in policing to create an environment where officers feel comfortable addressing mental health openly (Soomro & Yanos, 2018). Although progress has been made, continuous efforts from both law enforcement leadership and mental health professionals are necessary to maximize the impact and utilization of the EAP.

This study described the experiences of law enforcement officers in Central Florida who utilized an EAP after a critical incident. Specifically, there was a quest to reveal the law enforcement officers' experiences and thoughts about seeking assistance for EAP for stress-related issues. Without the proper mental health support, continuous trauma exposure can lead to burnout, compassion fatigue, moral injury, or other psychological problems over an officer's career.

Jean Piaget's (1970) constructivist self-development theory established a foundation for McCann and Pearlman's (1990) vicarious traumatization theory, which guided this study. The constructivist self-development theory proposes that individuals actively construct knowledge through environmental interactions (Piaget, 1978). Vicarious traumatization theory collectively underscores the significance of understanding and addressing the potential negative impact of trauma work (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Comparatively, officers possess varying cognitive abilities and thinking patterns as they develop and mature throughout their careers. Constructivist self-development theory supports the idea that law enforcement officers are active participants in knowledge construction and personal growth rather than passive recipients of information. Moreover, the theory asserts that individuals formulate their personal realities to shape their subsequent feelings and behaviors. This holds for law enforcement officers who form their beliefs about their work and the public after experiencing a critical incident. This study presents the lived experiences of Central Florida law enforcement officers who utilized EAP services after a critical incident.

### **Significance of the Study**

The importance of this study in criminal justice leadership lies in examining law enforcement officers' perceptions of their lived experiences with an EAP after a critical incident.



It offered deep insights into officers' attitudes and opinions regarding EAP programs. The need to study the lived experiences of law enforcement officers in seeking professional help can positively impact their department, strengthen community relationships, and build confidence in EAP (Ceka & Ermasova, 2021). Supportive leadership in law enforcement that provides adequate mental wellness resources can foster trust among the staff and create safe work environments (Burns & Buchanan, 2020; Thoen et al., 2020). Even though several studies have explored various aspects of EAP services, there needs to be more literature regarding the lived experiences of law enforcement officers to potentially effect positive work outcomes (Thoen et al., 2020). There is a need to understand the impact of trauma exposure and stressors on law enforcement officers (Davies et al., 2022).

This study addressed the knowledge gap through qualitative methods exploring officers' views on EAPs following traumatic incidents and providing outcomes to executive police leadership (McCarty et al., 2019; Moore et al., 2023). The researcher expected the findings would provide actionable insights to reduce stigma, increase buy-in, bolster EAP engagement, and support law enforcement officer wellness. This approach efficiently offered a pathway to develop knowledge focused on the meaning and realities of officers in the law enforcement environment, one that is rarely done in policing (Queirós et al., 2020). Including the officers' demographics, rank, service time, and assignment in this study was essential because some aspects may influence the officers' thoughts about seeking mental health support. Implementing supportive measures is critical to enable offices to process trauma exposures in a healthy way rather than bottling up their struggles, which impair their well-being and influence their careers long-term (Langlieb et al., 2021).

## **Research Questions**

The research questions were structured to provide a foundational understanding of the law enforcement officers' experiences with EAP after a critical incident. The central research question investigated the lived experiences of law enforcement officers who utilized an EAP after critical incidents while employed by a Central Florida agency. Thoen et al. (2020) indicated minimal evidence of EAP experiences for law enforcement officers. Additionally, Subquestion 1 was incorporated to understand law enforcement officers' perceptions of the barriers to seeking EAP assistance. Milot (2019) revealed that workers' perceptions of mental health stigma likely impact the programs' intended benefits. Lastly, Subquestion 2 explored what the officers believed were the tangible benefits of EAP programs. An in-depth examination of the effects of an EAP in improving work-related outcomes is essential to assist law enforcement (Crowe et al., 2022). The following research questions guided the study:

### **Central Research Question**

What are the lived experiences of law enforcement officers who used employee assistance programs (EAPs) after a critical work-related incident?

### **Subquestion 1**

What do law enforcement officers perceive as barriers to accessing employee assistance programs (EAPs) after a critical work-related incident to address stress-related issues?

### **Subquestion 2**

What do law enforcement officers believe are the tangible benefits of employee assistance programs (EAPs) after a critical work-related incident?

The research questions were used to formulate ideas to understand the law enforcement officers' experiences using EAPs after exposure to critical incidents. Blumberg and Papazoglou

(2019) explored the mental health wounds of police work, and they provided insight into the impact of line-of-duty exposure to traumatic events on law enforcement officers in hopes of bringing awareness to more mental wellness interventions. Blumberg et al. (2020) agreed that the emotional impact a career in law enforcement leaves on individuals should be addressed and expounded on the moral risks to the officer's mental health and the essential need for solid intervention to prevent moral dangers.

Law enforcement officers must share their concerns, biases, and obstacles when using EAP to help them get the necessary support (Blumberg et al., 2022). Bouzikos et al. (2022) determined that agencies employ EAPs for their distressed employees, but the focus may need to capture the context of their problems more accurately. According to Lilly and Curry (2020), other studies determined a psychological impact on law enforcement due to their job exposure. Still, due to stigmas, there is a reluctance to seek EAP services (Velazquez & Hernandez, 2019; Violanti, 2020). Milot (2019) explained that stigmas and barriers to using EAP are rarely studied and that various stigmas hinder individuals from seeking and accepting help. Even though EAP users have reported that top stressors resulting from their jobs included mental health issues, they still elected not to seek the assistance of EAP (Milot & Borkenhagen, 2018).

Overall, this study's research questions were structured to understand law enforcement officers' experiences utilizing EAP after exposure to critical incidents. ODare et al. (2023) discovered an operational need to create an improved customized mental health program to support firefighters' cognitive and behavioral health needs. The literature exhibited a condition for a new standard to address first responders' inclusion in law enforcement to support behavioral health.

### Definitions

*Burnout*: A syndrome that comprises a “pattern of emotional overload and subsequent emotional exhaustion” that results from workplace stress not being adequately managed (Maslach, 1982, p. 3; World Health Organization [WHO], 2019).

*Compassion fatigue*: A stress response that develops without warning when officers experience exhaustion, frustration, anger, and mental health problems resulting from helping individuals during traumatic events as a part of their jobs (Papazoglou, Koskelainen, et al., 2019).

*Constructivist self-development theory*: An active process beyond receiving or consuming information, which instead emphasizes constructing personal knowledge and experiences by understanding the outside world (Piaget, 1970).

*Critical incidents*: Situations that cause public safety personnel to experience strong emotional reactions to events that interfere with their ability to perform their duties (Carleton et al., 2019).

*Employee assistance program (EAP)*: Measures for mental health and personal and professional matters impacting job performance (Hsu et al., 2020).

*Job satisfaction*: A pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences (Piotrowski et al., 2021).

*Law enforcement*: The tasks performed by a group that graduated from a police academy and is responsible for keeping “social order” and enforcing the laws (Barthelemy et al., 2016, p. 415).

*Moral injury*: Occurs when an unprecedented traumatic life event is perceived to perpetrate, fail to prevent, or witness actions that “transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations” of the helper (Litz et al., 2009, p. 695).

*Stress*: A “ubiquitous experience impacting physiological, psychological, relational, and spiritual functioning” (Knabb & Vazquez, 2018, p. 37).

*Traumatic event*: Stressful incidents that are physical or psychologically injurious, which cause an emotional or mental disorder where the individual feels overwhelmed (Civilotti et al., 2021).

*Vicarious traumatization*: The accumulative responses law enforcement officers experience after engaging with individuals experiencing trauma (McCann & Pearlman, 1990).

### **Summary**

EAPs are a phenomenon that has been around for a while. However, understanding the lived experiences of law enforcement officers with EAP needs further examination (Thoen et al., 2020). Law enforcement professionals exposed to critical workplace incidents are often offered an agency-sponsored EAP after a critical incident. The problem is that law enforcement officers severely underutilize the available services provided by EAP, even after critical incidents when the support is most urgently necessary to assist them with their mental readiness. Officers being ordered or referred by their agencies to EAP is not new in law enforcement. Unfortunately, there is limited research that explores law enforcement officers’ perceptions and experiences using EAP services. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand better the experiences of Central Florida law enforcement officers who utilize EAP following a critical incident.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

Chapter Two provides the foundation for this study by synthesizing the literature on employer-sponsored EAPs for law enforcement officers. The researcher shaped this study by introducing the theoretical framework of constructivist self-development theory, its fundamental principles, and related literature that includes vicarious traumatization concepts, such as compassion fatigue, burnout, and moral injury. The beginning of the chapter is a synthesis of recent and modern literature about EAPs and the programs' influence on law enforcement. The chapter concludes with a summary of the chapter and additional literature about the barriers, benefits, and cultural influences for law enforcement officers using EAP after a critical incident.

### **Theoretical Framework**

A theoretical framework refers to the conceptual structure that guides the development and organization of this study. It provides a foundational understanding of the research phenomena focused on law enforcement officers' experiences using an EAP after critical incidents. This study incorporated the constructivist self-development theory, which allowed the researcher to conceptualize the participants' constructed realities of their EAP experiences after a critical incident (Roberts et al., 2022). Constructivist self-development theory espouses that individuals create an understanding of the world through personal experiences and active learning (Piaget, 1978). Crucial elements within Piaget's (1978) theory suggest that cognitive development is influenced by assimilation, accommodation, and equilibration. The process is widely regarded as active beyond simply receiving or consuming information and instead emphasizes constructing knowledge and understanding. Examining the fundamental principles of

constructivism indicates that individuals are inclined to adopt favorable behaviors from their experiences.

This study was founded on a constructivist self-development theoretical framework because it highlights how law enforcement officers obtain knowledge of the world by actively learning and meaning-making from personal experiences (Saakvitne et al., 1998). The process is characterized by an ongoing development and responsiveness to changing cultural and social contexts, continually enhancing one's sense of self (Saakvitne et al., 1998). The idea contends with the conventional framework of trauma theory, which focuses on the negative impacts and overlooks the potential for growth and positive outcomes. The theory emphasizes the role of individuals working with trauma victims (McCann & Pearlman, 1992). While acknowledging law enforcement challenges in the aftermath of critical incidents, Richards et al. (2021) recognized the struggles that support constructivist self-development theory, which served as the framework in this current study. Life experience, personal trauma history, and coping practices are factors that influence vicarious trauma (Dunkley & Whelan, 2006). The study highlights the significance of constructivist self-development theory in helping law enforcement officers to effectively manage their experiences and attain a sense of themselves and their core values (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Although earlier researchers explored student and counselor resilience, researchers called for further research to broaden the understanding across different occupations. Additionally, it has been shown that social support and positive relationships play a role in the process (Saakvitne et al., 1998).

### **Summary of Key Principles**

According to Miller et al. (2010), the constructivist self-development theory can be utilized in various settings. Their study illustrated how exciting tasks make students more

enthusiastic about learning. Similarly, adding meaningful and more relevant duties to officers' workloads can positively impact their productivity (Stogner et al., 2020). Significantly, constructivist self-development theory can also potentially influence the impact of EAPs on the mental health of law enforcement officers after critical incidents (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Cultivating resilience and coping strategies can effectively support law enforcement professionals in maintaining their well-being and ensuring the longevity of their professional endeavors (Stogner et al., 2020). The model of constructivist self-development theory is designed to explain the formation of a personal identity among law enforcement officers in the aftermath of critical events (Saakvitne et al., 1998). The significance of self-efficacy in reducing stress and fostering resiliency is reaffirmed by concepts within constructivist self-development theory, which can offer vital support for the mental well-being of officers (Bąk & Ogińska-Bulik, 2022).

The researcher sought to highlight law enforcement officers' experiences using an EAP following a critical incident. Reflective practices facilitate self-introspection, ultimately leading to personal growth and improved behaviors (Saakvitne et al., 1998). Similarly, collaborating and interacting with others with comparable experiences can facilitate the change process in individuals. This study emphasized the impact of the law enforcement environment, language, and culture on the officers' development. It also advocated for the officers' reflection on their experiences in the policing world for heightened self-development (Saakvitne et al., 1998). The researcher developed research questions to explore the experiences, viewpoints, and beliefs of law enforcement officers who utilized an EAP after critical incidents.



## Relevance to Study

McCann and Pearlman (1990) advanced the constructivist self-development framework through their studies of college students. The framework integrated concepts from self-psychology and social cognition theories. They espoused the value of personal stress and strain as critical elements in a constructivist trauma approach. In their seminal work, McCann and Pearlman (1990) developed a comprehensive conceptual framework for the impact of client relationships on therapists, referring to it as “vicarious traumatization.” The construct is similar to law enforcement officers who regularly engage in traumatic situations and may suffer compassion fatigue and burnout (Papazoglou, Koskelainen, & Stuewe, 2019; Papazoglous, Marans, et al., 2020). Frontline workers, such as firefighters, police officers, and healthcare workers, can potentially develop vicarious traumatization due to their constant exposure to traumatic incidents. Vicarious trauma can manifest into symptoms of depression, anxiety, and burnout that impact job performance (WHO, 2019). Specifically, compassion fatigue, burnout, and moral injury are the baselines for supporting and validating this study. Individuals experiencing this form of trauma have the potential to develop a new sense of self, marked by an increased vulnerability and a sense of detachment from interpersonal relationships, professional performance, and their sense of self. Miller et al. (2010) investigated the correlation between deviations in one’s psychological safety needs, intimacy, esteem, trust, and control. Their research aligned with McCann and Pearlman’s (1990) trauma theory.

The stress experienced by law enforcement officers can adversely affect their mental health and contribute to unfavorable interactions with others (Queirós et al., 2020). Bishopp et al. (2018) found a significant association between law enforcement occupational stress and the subsequent impact on the officers’ performances. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2020) discussed how

anxiety can potentially contribute to the manifestation of unethical behavior. Moreover, Greinacher et al. (2019) examined the impact of job stress on first responders and found compelling evidence of secondary traumatization among paid and volunteer first responders. Engaging in a profession within law enforcement means heightened exposure to stress-inducing and psychologically distressing events, which is more remarkable than in other professions (Richards et al., 2021). Furthermore, Soomro and Yanos (2018) asserted that the existing body of research on the mental health stigmas within the law enforcement culture is minimal. The absence of knowledge has implications for understanding the influence of EAPs in shaping law enforcement officers' beliefs, perceptions, and experiences after a critical incident.

Like other mental wellness programs, EAPs are designed to provide assistance and support to law enforcement employees who encounter distinct mental health difficulties and pressures from the job (Demou et al., 2020). A comprehensive theoretical framework of self-development that can include EAPs potentially exists in law enforcement. Constructivist self-development is a concept grounded in a broad constructivist framework that highlights active engagement in building knowledge, skills, and self-perception through interactions with the surrounding environment. Constructivist self-development theory is the foundation within the scope of EAPs tailored for law enforcement personnel. It is most appropriate given the officers' exposure to critical incidents in this study.

Engaging with counselors and peers in EAPs offers law enforcement officers opportunities to participate in the true meaning emphasized in constructivist self-development theory. Officer and EAP staff interactions can potentially lead to improved self-perceptions, coping skills, and overall functioning for law enforcement personnel. The involvement of an EAP enables officers to develop and enhance their knowledge and abilities to navigate trauma

impacts. This theory sheds light on how EAP might support law enforcement officers in positively coping with traumatic experiences and facilitating personal growth.

The primary objective of this study was to emphasize the significance of developing self-awareness, professional enhancement, and personal growth among law enforcement officers by providing a platform to acknowledge and manage their EAP experiences. The fundamental principles of constructivist self-development theory are directly relevant to the objectives of police EAPs in the aftermath of a critical incident. EAPs are aimed to furnish law enforcement officers with assistance and tools to successfully manage traumatic encounters, enhance their ability to recover from stressful events and cultivate adaptive mechanisms for dealing with stress. The process closely corresponds with the concepts of active learning and personal development through challenging life circumstances proposed by the constructivist self-development theory.

### **Related Literature**

#### **Overview of Police EAPs**

Natural disasters, terrorist attacks, and a worldwide pandemic referred to as COVID-19 created stress on law enforcement officers like others in the workforce (Langlieb et al., 2021). Police EAP initiatives are designed to support and assist law enforcement officers in all aspects of their personal and professional lives. These programs address the unique challenges and stressors those serving their communities face. Many law enforcement agencies provide EAP, which involves counseling, referrals, and more services geared toward providing help for trauma-related issues (Fox et al., 2012; U.S. Office Personnel Management, 2023). The overarching goal is to mitigate the impact of vicarious trauma by offering confidential and readily available resources for addressing critical incidents.

Nevertheless, research revealed that law enforcement officers underutilize EAP after experiencing a traumatic event. Astonishingly, only a tiny fraction of around 20% take advantage of the EAP services to experience the possible benefits (Jetelina, Molsberry et al., 2020). EAP-sponsored training and wellness programs may mitigate officers' trauma exposures (Wild et al., 2020). EAPs incorporate confidential counseling and referral services to support employees with personal or work-related challenges. Secapramana et al. (2020) explained that the provisions of EAP began in the 19th century with the intent to enhance worker efficiency. Even so, throughout the 1940s, EAPs assisted employees who faced alcohol and drug misuse (Baskar et al., 2021). However, EAPs have expanded to include additional support programs, such as mental health, relationship counseling, legal and financial matters, and occupational stress (Baskar et al., 2021; Secapramana et al., 2020). Other prevalent topics within EAPs incorporate substance and alcohol addiction, weight management, and healthy lifestyle training (Masi, 2020; Narendiran & Divya, 2022).

Baskar et al. (2021) explained that it is customary for organizations to provide EAP services to employees without any associated costs. Many employees gain access to EAPs through supervisory referrals or self-referrals for their mental wellness (Employee Assistance Professionals Association, 2020). Their employers often refer law enforcement officers to seek their employer-sponsored EAP to minimize workplace stress (Crowe et al., 2022; Chellam & Divya, 2022). As a result of COVID-19, telemedicine and virtual services are additional services provided to assist with workplace stress (Langlieb et al., 2021). Typically, law enforcement agencies encourage frontline supervisors to refer officers to EAP if they recognize a decline in their work or routinely after a critical incident. Often, the goal is to advance employees' mental well-being to promote impactful work outcomes (Baskar et al., 2021). Unfortunately, law

enforcement officers are not always forthcoming about their mental health concerns during their allocated visits.

The Employee Assistance Professionals Association (2020) revealed that most Fortune 500 businesses provide their employees with EAP services to enhance organizational performance. Additionally, federal and state governments routinely contract EAP services to manage and handle their employees' responses to significant incidents, which can negatively impact the organization (Attridge, 2019). Although law enforcement officers are frequently exposed to critical incidents, their voluntary use of EAP mental wellness programs remains low (Moore et al., 2023; Secapramana et al., 2020). Given the low program usage, the organization's objectives are likely not achieved with EAP.

### **Police EAP Goals and Services**

Providing EAP services is prevalent in law enforcement organizations. The programs usually include cognitive-behavior therapy and debriefing session facilitation following critical incidents (Fox et al., 2012; Employee Assistance Program, 2020). However, Collazo (2020) revealed that targeted cognitive-behavioral intervention programs supported by EAP offer more prevention support to law enforcement professionals exposed to highly stressful events. According to Attridge (2019), many program users are cleared to return to their regular work performance after only a few sessions with an EAP counselor. Ironically, another study found that even after 18 interventions, additional EAP sessions were needed to see positive impacts on the officers' resiliency (Wild et al., 2020; Winders et al., 2020). Additional psychotherapies were suggested to improve best practices (Alden et al., 2020).

Police officers benefit significantly from reflecting on their experiences and successfully managing their emotions within a trusted, secure, and encouraging setting (Lee et al., 2017;

Lockey et al., 2021). Implementing mental health initiatives like EAPs intends to facilitate law enforcement officers to improve their self-awareness and comprehension of seeking support (Burns & Buchanan, 2020). The objective of the initiative is to enhance the ability of officers to manage better the physical, mental, and emotional challenges associated with their line of work to enhance their level of job satisfaction (Burns & Buchanan, 2020; Lockey et al., 2021) and increase their job performances (Mumford et al., 2021).

Exposure to traumatic events, violence, and high-pressure situations can influence an officer's mental health (Richards et al., 2021). Furthermore, Chellam and Divya (2022) proposed that organizational advancements have increased employee stress and burnout, negatively impacted their performances, and contributed to corporate attrition. Bouzikos et al. (2022) argued that implementing EAP increased productivity and reduced employee healthcare expenses. The economic burden of stress, anxiety, and depression resulted in about 16 million days lost from work (Office of National Statistics, 2020). Chronic stress in the context of policing is associated with increased mortality and morbidity rates, as well as various physical health issues if left unattended. A recent study by Crowe et al. (2022) showed that EAP could potentially positively impact law enforcement officers who struggle with stress and mental health challenges.

Larger corporate organization's human resource departments typically manage law enforcement-style EAPs to support employees' professional and personal well-being (Hsu et al., 2019). The extent of research on the true foundation origin of EAP formation has been moderately researched (Masi, 2020). Despite the intention of EAP services to enhance an organization's dedication to supporting employees, research conducted by Moore et al. (2023) and Bowers et al. (2020) indicated that most employer-offered EAP programs are not fully

utilized. Also, only a limited number of clinicians have the necessary skills and knowledge to adequately address law enforcement officers' specific mental health needs related to traumatic exposure (Bowers et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2023).

The law enforcement profession is widely recognized as one of the most psychologically demanding occupations due to the inherent risks, exposure to trauma, and many pressures within an organizational context that officers encounter, particularly during critical circumstances.

Carleton et al. (2019) described critical incidents as eliciting an emotional response that interferes with the law enforcement officer's ability to respond appropriately to present or future crises. Routine reactions to critical incidents throughout the officers' careers predispose them to high stress levels, which could be mitigated through EAPs or other mental health programs.

Learning more about law enforcement officers' experiences, perceptions, and beliefs about EAP may benefit the profession. Likewise, Ramchand et al. (2019) identified numerous law enforcement agencies that endeavor to promote improved officer mental wellness programs by offering EAP to their personnel. However, they determined that the program services were underutilized.

### **Police EAP Utilization**

The role of law enforcement officers, according to Galanis et al. (2021), is to contribute to the welfare of society, but they must also protect their mental and physical health. In order to maintain public confidence in their service, it is essential for EAPs to adequately address the stressors officers face in the line of duty (Stogner et al., 2020). It is vital for the benefit of law enforcement officers' fitness for duty and the communities they serve. Police, firefighters, and correctional officers often hesitate to access professional mental health services despite their regular exposure to high-stress and traumatic incidents for various reasons. According to studies

by Newell et al. (2021) and Violanti (2020), law enforcement officers experience mental health-related situations regularly. However, the studies indicate that officers often resist seeking and utilizing appropriate EAP services for their issues. Chronic stress in policing has been associated with increased mortality and morbidity rates and various physical health issues if left unattended. In a recent study, Crowe et al. (2022) found that realizing wellness initiatives, counseling, and the agency's culture impact law enforcement officers dealing with stress and mental health issues.

Moore et al. (2023) found that enhancing usage in employer-sponsored programs can be achieved by offering support and regular assessments to ensure EAP initiatives adequately cater to employee needs. Ramchand et al. (2019) identified that numerous law enforcement agencies endeavor to promote officer wellness by offering an EAP for their personnel. However, the employees forgo using the program for mental health issues unless mandated. Their unwillingness to inquire about a mental health diagnosis and subsequent treatment typically results from concerns about the potential fear of stigmatization and discrimination (A.M. Daniel & Treece, 2022).

Law enforcement officers are not immune to the prevailing skepticism toward institutional structures. The primary obstacles that hinder their utilization of EAP services are the stigmatization associated with seeking help, apprehensions regarding preserving confidentiality, and preconceived notions about people exhibiting signs of mental distress (Newell et al., 2022). While some progress has been made in reducing the stigma of seeking help after traumatic experiences and critical incidents, cultural attitudes still discourage officers from utilizing available services (Krakauer et al., 2020).



### ***Barriers to EAP Use***

Both personal and occupational barriers lead to law enforcement officers' underutilization of EAP services. Stigmas around mental health treatment exist within the police culture (Grupe, 2023; Gutschmidt & Vera, 2020; Soomro & Yanos, 2018). Officers' reluctance to utilize EAP often results from the fear of the lack of confidentiality that could potentially impact their career advancement aspirations (Martin et al., 2021; Papazoglou, Marans et al., 2020). Officers have a greater inclination to seek counseling services when they have a sense of confidence that their personal information will be kept private, as well as the assurance that engaging with the program for mental health reasons will not adversely affect their professional goals (Martin et al., 2021; Ricciardelli et al., 2020).

The presence of stigmas surrounding mental health and the reluctance of officers to seek help contribute to increased pressure on the person and organization (Violanti, 2020). Although more than 10% revealed they had a mental health diagnosis, they chose to opt out of seeking services due to their concerns about stigma and mistrust of the mental health professional's lack of understanding of the officer's daily challenges. Unfortunately, another study revealed that the percentage of officer suicides often exceeds the number of overall line-of-duty law enforcement fatalities (Jetelina, Molsberry et al., 2020). Moreover, there are notions regarding the potential barriers that result in the underutilization of mental health programs that may hinder officers from proactively engaging in services (Hofer, 2022; Hofer & Savell, 2021). Agencies encounter challenges in retaining officers due to the unaddressed stress and the stigma associated with their job exposures (Velazquez & Hernandez, 2019). When the job challenges overwhelm an officer's ability to cope, some will abandon the profession before allowing themselves to be seen as weak

or unfit. Reducing the stigma may also improve officers' willingness to access EAP services following exposure to trauma and stress (Newell et al., 2022).

After examination of other factors that caused impeded access, it was found that employers should ensure officers know the confidentiality safeguards offered by EAPs and actively encourage them to seek the services when necessary (Quick, 2023). Similarly, Newell et al. (2022) recommended enhancing mental health support by implementing measures to safeguard confidentiality, facilitate expedited access to resources, and provide occupational-specific assistance. Training supervisors and colleagues on recognizing early indicators of distress and promoting a supportive environment intended to encourage officers to seek help when needed can successfully minimize adverse problems for the officer and organization (Craddock & Telesco, 2021).

### ***Police Culture***

The role of police culture is crucial in understanding officers' mental health challenges (A. Edwards & Kotera, 2021). Several studies have addressed the influence of law enforcement culture in shaping officers' attitudes toward mental health and help-seeking behaviors (Demou et al., 2020; Newell et al., 2022). However, some disagreements exist about how culture impacts decisions to use mental wellness program services. In order to safeguard the mental well-being of the officers, it is imperative to recognize and overcome these obstacles (Ricciardelli et al., 2021). In the past, scholars have not fully supported the theory of the police culture due to methodological flaws and have emphasized the importance of further research (R. J. Burke, 2018; Gutschmidt & Vera., 2020; Violanti et al., 2016). Values of strength, solidarity, awareness of dangers, and guardianship over society are connected to law enforcement culture. Cultural values influence how officers think, feel, and respond to their occupational demands (Frantz et

al., 2023). The language used in the artifacts within the culture shared rituals, and myths about the organization contribute to officers' restraint towards seeking assistance (Gutschmidt & Vera, 2020).

Furthermore, it is worth noting that within the broader cultural context, a very distinct subculture exists within agencies that encompasses various units and teams. Specific high assignments such as drug units, SWAT, or homicide investigations may be perceived as elite, which leads the assigned officers from exhibiting indications of vulnerability when seeking assistance for mental health concerns, resulting in officers intentionally avoiding EAP services (Burns & Buchanan, 2020; Drew & Martin, 2023). These specialized teams create more of a perceived need for officers to exhibit a stricter demeanor, preventing them from being open about their negative responses to their experiences. Despite officers feeling symptoms of occupational stress, it is reported that many detectives maintained their narrowed worldview of "us versus them," machismo, and mission action orientation to their jobs, further restricting their willingness to seek help (Brownstone & Hiruko, 2022; Frantz et al., 2023). Much of the literature revealed that child abuse investigators were most likely to suffer secondary trauma; men are at higher risk of suffering from burnout, but their female counterparts were most likely to suffer compassion fatigue and burnout (Losung et al., 2021).

Throughout history, there has been a lack of emphasis within the law enforcement culture on fostering discussions regarding stress and its impact on the mental well-being of police (Craddock & Telesco, 2021). As a result, officers tend to avoid seeking support for the psychological consequences of their profession (Soomro & Yanos, 2018). The values that law enforcement officers place on their assignments might lead to induced stress in attempting to fit in with others and fear of underperforming (Craddock & Telesco, 2021). Nevertheless, the

impact of stressors within the police culture has few empirical studies (Gutschmidt & Vera, 2020). Most research primarily focuses on individual aspects, while minimal attention examines individuals' experiences with EAP, which supports social components and possesses inherent benefits. Recommendations to analyze the impact of mental health outcomes included incorporating topics of bravery, humor, and the suppression of unpleasant emotions about the job, which were recommended for future studies (Gutschmidt & Vera, 2020). Additional recommendations include leveraging law enforcement agencies' responses toward mental health-mandated counseling (Hofer & Savell, 2021). Across various studies, cultural factors like stigma, norms that discourage vulnerability, and the absence of resilience support have been cited as barriers that prevent officers from accessing EAP services after trauma exposures (Grupe, 2023; Ricciardelli et al., 2021).

Clements et al. (2020) presented evidence that some positive changes are transforming the police culture. One significant change is attributed to an increasing number of agency administrators displaying greater openness in discussing the many stressors of the job and providing help through supporting EAP services. Research commended police departments for enhancing their employees' knowledge regarding available mental health resources (Richards et al., 2021). Nevertheless, despite the offerings of EAP counseling services, significant obstacles still hinder law enforcement officers from utilizing mental health resources (Carleton et al., 2020; Ricciardelli et al., 2021).

Another cultural enhancement includes improving supervisory support. Primarily, Lucia and Halloran (2020) set out to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives held by program managers responsible for overseeing programs to support officers in managing stress and addressing mental health concerns. They disclosed the positive potential for enhancing the

cognitive and behavioral programs geared toward police (Lucia & Halloran, 2020). Despite officers' lack of intention to seek EAP assistance, more than 4,000 North American officers with authoritarian attitudes indicated a need for support, care, and resources due to elevated high-stress levels. However, the attitudes of their peers and supervisors toward mental health programs influenced their decision to use the resources (Jetelina, Molsberry et al., 2020). The Australian government (2020) identified key factors determining why individuals are reluctant to seek mental health resources and disclose their need for assistance. These aspects include a limited understanding of available mental health resources, concerns regarding the potential repercussions on their career trajectory, and apprehensions about the adverse influence on their professional aspirations. Some studies highlighted significant barriers that impede officers from accessing the necessary support for their mental well-being, including their coworker's perceptions (Ricciardelli et al., 2020). In another study, Velazquez & Hernandez (2019) advocated for the active engagement of police departments in mitigating stigmas associated with mental health concerns and proposed cultivating a supportive and transparent organizational culture as an efficient strategy. Supervisors can minimize the impact of burnout and stress by promoting a positive work environment that encourages intrinsic work values that encourage job satisfaction (Piotrowski et al., 2021).

Furthermore, Drew and Martin (2023) underscored the need to consider the stigmas surrounding help-seeking behaviors concerning the length of service, gender, and agency size among officers. The study revealed that officers' attitudes toward seeking mental health assistance could be enhanced with increased years of experience and mental health training. It is essential to understand how an agency's size, work assignment, and gender can affect officers' reactions to job exposures (Burnett et al., 2020). Losung et al. (2021) found that gender

differences and the length of time an officer serves on the police force may be predictors of secondary trauma factors.

In a national study, Thoen et al. (2020) found that therapy was the most referred area among law enforcement agencies offering an EAP. However, the study revealed that less than a quarter of the officers were familiar with the advantages of the programs, and less than half believed their respective agencies prioritized their mental well-being (Thoen et al., 2020). Verifying the efficiency of an agency's wellness program was determined to be the most crucial element in demonstrating support for officers' mental health (Thoen et al., 2020). Other suggestions for enhancing the usage of EAPs include helping officers comprehend the advantages and available resources associated with the program, ensuring efficient distribution of program materials, highlighting the benefits, and facilitating convenient access to program representatives. ODare et al.'s (2023) study supported the enhancement of mental health training and intervention programs because it is believed EAPs may need to be improved to meet the needs of trauma-exposed first responders. McKinley and Jones (2023) advised allowing officers to self-manage minor issues independently. It is crucial to understand that not every incident will require officers to seek professional services. McKinley and Jones determined that officers are prone to cumulative exposure to traumatic events throughout their careers, potentially needing formal mental health coping strategies. Still, they should practice self-care and trust the available resources (McKinley & Jones, 2023). Programs like the HEROES Project, which allows law enforcement officers access to an online training resource, have shown positive benefits in helping the officers develop and maintain mental resilience by providing therapeutic tools (Thornton et al., 2020). These types of programs are anonymous and provide autonomy for first responders who want to seek means of private self-care.

## **Benefits of EAP**

EAPs offer a diverse array of services aimed at bolstering the overall welfare of law enforcement officers. The services provided encompass counseling, crisis intervention, and the provision of referrals to specialized treatment providers (Langlieb et al., 2021). The services are structured to assist officers with personal and professional problems (Milot & Borkenhagen, 2018). According to C. O. Daniel (2019), organizations promote using EAPs to increase officers' job performance. He projected agencies that provide EAP would see improved outcomes regarding their officers' performances. The positive results are attributed to the availability of possibilities for officers to deconflict following critical incidents (C. O. Daniel, 2019). Carleton et al. (2019) championed peer programs and formal structures, such as critical incident stress management (CISM), to strengthen the utilization of mental health programs after exposure to critical incidents. The rigorous demands associated with policing may elicit a stress response that prompts timely and relevant mental health support (Jiang, 2021).

In a comprehensive literature review of first responder organizations for developing a behavioral health access program, Mumford et al. (2021) found a notable increase in initiatives to reduce work stress on officers' mental well-being. Galanis et al. (2021) found evidence to suggest that law enforcement officers working in larger metropolitan areas are more prone to encounter more stress-related incidents, leaving the idea that more programs are needed in those departments. The impact of the occurrences on officers' coping mechanisms may be contingent upon various factors, including age, marital status, lifestyle, and gender (Galanis et al., 2021).

Officers who used the EAP and their receptiveness to recommend it indicate that officers had a higher propensity to use EAP for other services not involving mental health. However, they were less inclined to advocate for the program among their colleagues (Quick, 2023). In an

assessment of mental health programs for U.S. military personnel, Ramchand et al. (2019) revealed that the established guidelines were not always proactive, and specific approaches to assessing suicide risk were shown to be unsuccessful. Although peer-support programs lack reliable data on their effectiveness, experts perceived them to exhibit the most efficacy in promoting the mental well-being of police officers (Crowe et al., 2022). The impact of mental health programs intended to support law enforcement officers remains a topic of debate among researchers (E. Burke et al., 2019; Crowe et al., 2022). Therefore, examining the officers' experiences with EAP services is essential.

Secapramana et al. (2020) explained that enhancing the organizational climate through cultivating the job to meet employees' job satisfaction may eventually lead to improved organizational efficiency. Through utilizing mental health resources, officers gain access to the necessary support to manage the stress and trauma associated with their careers successfully. The resources, in turn, can potentially enhance their job performance and overall quality of life (Secapramana et al., 2020). Blumberg (2022) asserted the significance of clinicians working with officers in the aftermath of posttraumatic events to gain insight into the potential impact of moral injury on professional duties. Despite the numerous advantages of EAPs, many officers fail to use the program. Multiple reasons contribute to underutilization, including stigma surrounding mental health issues, concerns about confidentiality, and a lack of awareness about available resources. In a comprehensive report to the Department of Justice, Spence et al. (2019) documented a notable increase in police agencies implementing EAPs nationwide. Additional studies indicated that despite the increased implementation of programs aimed at military veterans and law enforcement officers, these initiatives still have gaps (Carleton et al., 2020; Litz & Kerig, 2019; Spence et al., 2019).



## **Police Trauma Exposure**

Research suggests that stressors associated with their occupational responsibilities adversely impact law enforcement officers' mental and physical health (Jetelina, Beauchamp, et al., 2020; Queirós et al., 2020). The prevalence of traumatic stress exposure among police significantly impacts their overall well-being (Weiss et al., 2021). Between 2019 and 2020, three law enforcement agencies in the Dallas-Fort Worth area reported elevated injuries and instances of using physical force among the officers following extremely stressful occurrences (Queirós et al., 2020). Furthermore, Wagner et al. (2020) highlighted officers' regular exposure to critical incidents, which increases their susceptibility to an elevated risk of developing PTSD. Critical incidents are a fraction of the events that impact officers' wellness (Wagner et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the ramifications of officer experiences can leave lasting impacts that cause stress responses.

### ***Critical Incidents***

Promoting the mental wellness of law enforcement officers after a critical incident is essential to their ability to perform their duties (Blumberg, 2020). It is common for most officers to experience at least one traumatic exposure during their careers (Queirós et al., 2020; Velazquez & Hernandez, 2019). Research suggests that organizational and public pressures influence officers' mental health (Tuttle et al., 2019). Other analyses demonstrated that the emotional demands placed on frontline workers impact their emotional abilities, resulting in stress and burnout (Chen et al., 2019; Choi et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2022). However, lower stress levels are understudied in law enforcement (Fleischmann et al., 2022).

Law enforcement leaders are encouraged to create supportive professional environments by implementing measures to facilitate open dialogue among officers regarding their positive and

negative experiences, concerns, and apprehensions about using an EAP. Evidence suggests that quality relationships with superiors and colleagues will improve the psychological health of law enforcement officers even after experiencing critical work events (Deschênes, 2021).

Organizational-sponsored initiatives can potentially enhance social interactions and provide insight into officers' mental health (Papazoglou et al., 2022). Law enforcement frequently interprets and comprehends their surroundings through the world by drawing from their encounters and engagements with traumatic events (Tuttle et al., 2019). Studies indicate helping professionals, such as law enforcement, who are exposed to prolonged stress without adequate organizational support display symptoms associated with compassion fatigue, burnout, and moral injury (Litz & Kerig, 2019; Papazoglou, Blumberg, Briones-Chiongbain, et al., 2019; Tuttle et al., 2019).

Moreover, police agencies must consider their officers' unique experiences and viewpoints and collaborate with them to provide a deeper understanding and interpretation of their interactions. Acknowledging the significance of officers' individuality is crucial to collaborating with them efficiently and enhancing their circumstances. Tuttle et al. (2019) concluded that displays of gratitude, positive community participation, and mindfulness have improved wellness outcomes.

### **Vicarious Trauma Reactions**

Over time, continuous exposure to citizen trauma experiences can lead to vicarious trauma outcomes among law enforcement officers, such as burnout, compassion fatigue, and moral injury (Andersen et al., 2019; Papazoglou, Briones-Chiongbian et al., 2019). The presence of these stressors has been found to diminish the officers' capacity to exhibit compassion and empathy during their interactions with members of the public (Andersen & Papazolou, 2015;

Blumberg & Papazoglou, 2019; Pearlman & Ian, 1995). Law enforcement officers consistently act as emotional support for individuals affected by criminal activity. Papazoglou et al. (2022) explained that officers are prone to experiencing stress due to their frequent exposure to violence and traumatic incidents.

Evidence supports a correlation between officers who use their authority to take advantage of citizens and high-stress levels (Archibald & Akers, 2018). Many exhibit signs of irritability and are highly sensitive. Additionally, studies supported increased research on law enforcement stress because of the impact on community interactions (Queirós et al., 2020). Arguably, granting officers a sense of ownership in community involvement initiatives may mitigate some symptoms of secondary traumatic stress that arise from social pressures associated with public and organizational scrutiny (A. M. Daniel & Treece, 2022). Officers frequently encounter critical circumstances involving exposure to human suffering (Regehr et al., 2019; Violanti et al., 2019). If officers are not provided with proper strategies to combat stress, the outcomes can negatively influence community relations for them and their employers (Beer et al., 2022). Diminished public trust leads to recommendations for agencies to incorporate more extensive training programs. As a result, it is better for law enforcement agencies and the community for officers to learn to regulate their emotional responses (Wahyuni & Dewi, 2020). Papazoglou, Marans, et al. (2020) encouraged agencies to increase support for law enforcement officers and reinforce their attempts to help victims. It is anticipated that officers will exercise equitable and ethical judgment, hence facilitating the implementation of life-saving actions with appropriate mental wellness.

Frequent exposure to morally challenging incidents can create conflict between the officers' convictions and their ability to perform their duties (Blumberg, Papazoglou, et al.,

2020). However, they are bound by the laws and agency policies to protect and safeguard their communities (Johnson et al., 2019). The officers' religious and moral beliefs must be temporarily set aside as they fulfill their constitutional oath to protect all, regardless of their personal beliefs (Blumberg, 2022). During their career, law enforcement officers may be directed to seek support from their agency's EAP due to exposure to a distressing crime scene or as an avenue to build employee resiliency (Crowe et al., 2022).

Programs that equip police officers with skills to endure high levels of stress and recognize symptoms in their peers have proven invaluable (Katzman et al., 2021). Trusted and solid programs help improve officers' quality of life, productivity, and stress levels (G. Edwards, 2023). In a comparative analysis, it is evident that not all law enforcement officers undergo vicarious traumatization. Evidence suggests that some officers experience a sense of fulfillment from assisting others. Meanwhile, Jetelina, Beauchamp, et al. (2020) explained the significance of workplace programs in addressing the impact of vicarious traumas by alleviating negative stressors. Exposure to traumatic events and high stress levels predisposes officers to experience burnout, compassion fatigue, and moral injury (Tuttle et al., 2019).

The context of burnout is characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a decline in personal accomplishment (Basinka & Daderman, 2019; McCarty et al., 2019). Compassion fatigue is characterized by a decrease in empathetic responses and the development of cynical attitudes due to extended exposure to stress when assisting people experiencing trauma (Agelidis, 2020; Grant et al., 2019). Moral injury encompasses the internal conflict and guilt arising from violating deeply held moral beliefs or betraying trusted others, such as organizational leadership or colleagues (Komarovskaya et al., 2011).

## **Burnout**

Another characteristic of occupational stress that can result in burnout is chronic exhaustion, fatigue, and hopelessness toward work that has not been successfully managed (Aksoy & Yalcinsoy, 2018; Santa Maria et al., 2018; WHO, 2019). Burnout is a regrettable outcome that arises from the high demands and menacing law enforcement profession (Basinska & Daderman, 2019). Schaufeli et al. (2009) characterized burnout as an employee's prolonged reaction to occupational stress. According to de Figueiredo et al. (2014), burnout is a culminated feeling of exhaustion, frustration with work, and feeling overwhelmed. In 1974, researcher Herbert Freudenberger used the concept of "burnout" in his study (Aksoy & Yalcinsoy, 2018, p. 53; Freudenberger, 1986) to describe a worker's negative stress response to work. Many studies recognize the value of Maslach's (1982) burnout theory in explaining the emotional stress of police work. The experience of such emotions significantly impacts the workers' emotional state, leading to adverse reactions in their professional and personal lives (Correia et al., 2023; Maslach et al., 1996).

Formerly, burnout was measured to determine whether the environment produces coping strategies that allow officers to deal with job stressors (Hanebuth et al., 2012). There is a positive correlation between an officers' tenure in the profession and their ability to adapt to the stress of police work, hence enhancing their emotions to better cope with meeting the job demands (Crank, 2004; Grant et al., 2019; Paoline & Gao, 2017). Although feelings of empathy are believed to be a contributing risk factor for burnout, they are also thought to be a safeguard to protect officers (Correia et al., 2023). Showing empathy toward individuals in critical incidents can cause higher stress levels (Correia et al., 2023). Empathetic responses allow officers to distinguish themselves from victims and regulate their emotions, which helps avoid burnout

(Losung et al., 2021). Ideally, society wants compassionate and service-minded officers when engaging the community. In an effort to strengthen community relationships, many agencies are stressing the importance of developing social skills for new officers, and empathy is one of their primary focuses (Bloksgaard & Prieur, 2021).

More studies revealed that job-related burnout and engagement are linked to work values and a decline in performance (Queirós et al., 2020; Super, 2021). Male officers are more likely to suffer from burnout, and females are more likely to seek assistance (Losung et al., 2021). Rare studies investigate the predictors of burnout (Santa Maria et al., 2021). Research predicts burnout may result from higher levels of compassion fatigue (Grant et al., 2019).

### **Compassion Fatigue**

Charles Figley (2002a) defined compassion fatigue as a secondary trauma characterized by the cost of caring for others. Secondary traumatization refers to the phenomenon of people who help others who have undergone traumatic experiences themselves having a traumatic response due to their helping efforts. Previous scholarly literature characterized compassion fatigue as moral harm or distress (Jameton, 1984). The real impact of compassion fatigue, specifically on law enforcement, is understudied (Grant et al., 2019). The transactional model of stress by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) highlighted how an individual's occupation could trigger a stress response contingent upon their perception of the work environment. Although there is abundant research concerning compassion fatigue among law enforcement, studies deviate from prevalence rates and predictors. A greater consensus exists around interventions, with multiple studies advocating enhanced education, training, and readily available resources to mitigate the risk of compassion fatigue among law enforcement officers.

The literature explained how an individual's perceptions of violence and the potential for job injury influence their work stress levels and subsequent performance (Grant et al., 2019; Ondrejková & Halamová, 2022). Researchers have recognized compassion fatigue as a phenomenon that can manifest following exposure to trauma through interpersonal interactions, including empathetic reactions (Andersen et al., 2019; Papazoglou, Koskelainen, & Stuewe, 2019). About 20% of law enforcement officers have negative psychological experiences related to compassion fatigue that can impact their job performance (Burnett et al., 2020). Those professionals experiencing exhaustion and negative emotional, physiological, biological, and cognitive changes struggle to provide professional services (Bride et al., 2007; Burnett et al., 2020; Figley, 2002b).

Compassion fatigue symptoms frequently overlap with those observed in someone with PTSD. These symptoms include recalling traumatic experiences endured by others, avoiding anything associated with an incident, and hypervigilance (Figley, 2002b; Blumberg & Papazoglou, 2019). Officers may not recognize the symptoms of compassion fatigue, which can result in diminished mental wellness (Papazoglou, Marans et al., 2020).

Multiple studies explored the factors linked with compassion fatigue by varying degrees (Ondrejková & Halamová, 2022). Participants from diverse regions demonstrated moderate or greater levels of compassion fatigue. Grant et al. (2019) reported a reduced prevalence of compassion fatigue among urban police officers in the United States, potentially contributing to burnout. Meanwhile, a study conducted by Burnett et al. (2020) showed that officers in the United Kingdom had varying degrees of compassion fatigue, ranging from moderate to high.

According to Agelidis (2020), officers assigned to routine patrol zones demonstrate fewer compassion fatigue symptoms than those in specialized assignments (Grant et al., 2019).

Detectives working in specialized units who constantly interact with traumatized victims of car accidents, homicides, or abuse may suffer compassion fatigue (Ondrejková & Halamová, 2022). Like burnout, the officer's personality, tenure, gender, and self-care are predictors of compassion fatigue (Losung et al., 2021).

### **Moral Injury**

Moral injury is a psychological occurrence that may ensue from traumatic events, leading individuals to struggle with emotional and behavioral symptoms that conflict with their deeply held moral beliefs (Jinkerson & Battles, 2019; Tuttle et al., 2019). Blumberg (2022) posited that trauma of this nature is differentiated from PTSD due to its rooted internal conflict rather than being caused by an external danger. While researching the healthcare sector, Borges et al. (2020) learned that moral injury can occur without a traumatic event. Nonetheless, Blumberg (2022) maintained that moral injury among officers is not markedly different from other professions.

Officers are routinely exposed to highly stressful situations, which Litz and Kerig (2019) presented as directly associated with the occurrence of moral injury. As Mensink et al. (2022) explained, a morally dangerous incident encompasses instances in which an individual harms another person, cannot prevent harm, or is subject to abuse by someone in authority. Nash (2019) reported that experiencing morally harmful events at the root of a traumatic exposure can lead to lasting pain that predicts symptoms of PTSD. Those troubled with moral injury may encounter a wide range of emotional responses, encompassing guilt, humiliation, self-blame, regret, grief, sorrow, betrayal, and anguish (Jamieson et al., 2020; Molendijk, 2021).

Officers afflicted with moral injury may manifest subtle forms of self-harm, engage in reckless behavior, and display diminished motivation (Litz & Kerig., 2019). It is also essential to note that contemporary studies on PTSD have not adequately addressed the concept of moral



injury as it pertains to psychological exposures for law enforcement officers (Papazoglou & Chopka, 2017). Due to the inherent nature of the job, law enforcement officers are prone to experience moral suffering (Papazoglou, Blumberg et al., 2020).

Consequently, it is imperative to conduct further research into the phenomenon of moral injury and distress within the realm of law enforcement professionals. However, Papazoglou and Chopka (2017) interpreted the relationship between moral discomfort and compassion fatigue in law enforcement. The research was significant as it contributed to an emerging topic for law enforcement. Other research presented the significance of law enforcement officers suffering from moral injury and compassion fatigue (Papazoglou, Blumberg et al., 2020; Papagolou, Marans, et al., 2020). According to Litz et al. (2009), a moral injury is a life event that goes beyond one's control and violates their moral code, causing them to struggle with empathy and feelings of responsibility. Neria and Pickover (2019) agreed that moral injury can arise from various situations in which one is traumatized by another's actions.

Subsequently, Blumberg (2022) cautioned clinicians about moral erosion when working with law enforcement officers. Constant exposure to moral transgressions can lead to disengagement (Blumberg, 2022). Some care providers believe that addressing moral violations extends beyond their professional capabilities, resulting in a void in addressing mental health concerns (Litz et al., 2009). The void or lack of concerns can contribute to officers' disinterest in EAP services.

Whereas initial researchers primarily concentrated on moral harm among military veterans, it is acknowledged that this type of stress is also prevalent in broader groups that frequently encounter traumatic situations (Litz & Kerig, 2019). One widely accepted perspective is that individuals belonging to specific groups or organizations, such as military veterans and

law enforcement, may experience increased stress levels due to exposure to traumatic experiences that violate their moral values (Griffin et al., 2019). For instance, an officer may be ordered by their superiors to take enforcement action that juxtaposes their personal beliefs, which causes feelings of guilt (Blumberg et al., 2020). In contrast, some other studies highlighted the limited availability of material about moral injury's impacts on law enforcement officers (Blumberg, 2022; Blumberg & Papazoglou, 2019; Papazoglou, Blumberg et al., 2020). Due to the limited information, further research is necessary to understand varied moral injury veterans' and officer responses (Mensink et al., 2022).

Another study also determined that current techniques for treating trauma exposure may not be able to adequately help people who have experienced a morally injurious incident (Mensink et al., 2022). Komarovskaya et al. (2011) research demonstrated that officers who killed or seriously injured someone while acting in good faith have a lasting impact on the officer's mental health, which results in significant symptoms. Moreover, their mental well-being is impacted by long-term exposure to critical incidents (Craddock & Telesco, 2021). The information presented by Papazoglou, Blumberg et al. (2020) did not precisely measure moral injury, but it correlated with the impact of the incident on the officers' behavioral health. It is understood that law enforcement officers are frequently the first responders in situations of utmost urgency, exposing them to human suffering (Jinkerson & Battles, 2019). In dealing with the incident, officers are expected to make fair and ethical judgments to preserve lives. However, it is worth noting that officers' personal and spiritual views can conflict with their professional obligations (Griffin et al., 2019; Jinkerson & Battles., 2019).

Members of law enforcement are bound by the law and their agency's regulations to serve and safeguard their respective communities. Zhang et al. (2020) revealed anxiety and the

likelihood of engaging in unethical activities. Bishopp et al. (2018) explained that there is a correlation between organizational stressors and instances of misconduct. Officers' behavior can be influenced by their emotional reactions to stress (Bishopp et al., 2018).

Blumberg (2022) explained the various responsibilities undertaken by healthcare professionals who work with law enforcement officers and expressed the importance of providers defusing officers' responses to what is viewed as a moral injury. Blumberg's study suggested that the clinician directs their attention toward the officer's facial expressions and behavioral cues during counseling sessions. At the same time, there is no definitive measurement for assessing moral injury. Within the law enforcement profession, the information remains unclear. Contrarily, it is posited that providers who observe manifestations of anger, dehumanizing behaviors, and other similar transgressions should engage in discussions with police leaders to explore potential avenues for introducing intervention strategies (Blumberg et al., 2022).

Irrespective of law enforcement officers' personal, religious, and moral beliefs, they must put aside their convictions to fulfill their constitutional duty to protect all citizens regardless of their beliefs. A scoping review of moral injury among firefighters, paramedics, and police officers explained that first responders frequently encounter morally complex situations that potentially undermine their moral principles and lead to substantial emotional and psychological distress (Griffin et al., 2019; Lentz et al., 2021; Papazoglou & Chopko, 2017).

Blumberg and Papazoglou (2019) concurred that there is not enough research regarding the inherent moral risks associated with those serving in the law enforcement profession. Furthermore, their study provides evidence that moral hazards contribute to declining ethical decision-making among law enforcement officers. Moreover, it was observed that when officers

compromise their ethical beliefs, they tend to partake in behaviors that carry a higher degree of danger (Blumberg & Papazoglou, 2019). Hines et al. (2021) surveyed moral injury in healthcare workers and determined that a supportive workplace resulted in lower moral injury. On the other hand, a heightened level of environmental stress yielded increased moral harm, ultimately resulting in unfavorable consequences (Blumberg & Papazoglou, 2020). Litz et al. (2019) advocated including research accommodations to explore morally injurious experiences across professions beyond the military.

### **Summary**

Chapter Two included a concise synopsis of previous research, theoretical frameworks, and areas of research that still need to be explored in depth. The chapter provided a solid foundation for future research on EAPs and their utilization. It is vital that the programs adequately address the mental health needs of law enforcement officers. This chapter provided a comprehensive examination of the relevant literature, encompassing historical perspectives and contemporary and developing research on EAP and the mental health stressors experienced by law enforcement officers.

Police trauma is common but under-addressed, placing officers at risk for experiencing vicarious trauma over time. EAP services are under-utilized by law enforcement officers yet represent a vital resource for early intervention. A deeper understanding of officers' perspectives on EAP is needed to uncover the barriers they identify and inform improvements that promote utilization and trauma prevention to aid in lengthy and healthy careers.

Law enforcement officers frequently face significant stress levels during the shift, and utilizing EAPs can prove highly beneficial in preserving their mental well-being. Regrettably, the utilization of these services is primarily scarce due to law enforcement officers' concerns about

confidentiality, stigma, and the possibility of their issues being exposed. Furthermore, the prevailing culture within law enforcement agencies can present obstacles when accessing these services. In order to overcome the challenges, law enforcement leaders must adopt a comprehensive strategy to encompass resources that include anti-stigma education, policy modifications, proactive outreach efforts, provision of on-site counseling services, and a transformation in their existing police culture (Fiske et al., 2020). After a comprehensive review of various studies, a typical pattern was identified regarding law enforcement officers' views and behaviors about utilizing professional mental health services.

EAPs can provide significant support to police officers who encounter challenges related to high levels of stress and trauma inherent in their profession. Nevertheless, the success of EAPs is still hindered by notable concerns such as poor utilization rates, stigma, and barriers. The utilization of EAP services by law enforcement agencies is insufficient, even though the programs are crucial in facilitating early intervention and preventing stress-related problems for the officers, agency, and community.

The phenomenon of police trauma is anticipated, although frequently not preemptively addressed, exposing officers to the potential development of vicarious trauma that may compromise their well-being over time. There is a pressing need for improved awareness of the officers' perspectives about EAPs. This understanding is crucial to identify and address obstacles and provide insights that can facilitate the use of EAPs and encourage preventing negative traumatic responses throughout their law enforcement careers.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of active and retired law enforcement officers who utilized an EAP following a critical incident. The study contributes to the knowledge base within the law enforcement field. During this study, retired and active law enforcement officers who have used an EAP after a traumatic event were invited to participate in understanding its impact on the job-related stress of law enforcement officers. This chapter details the design of the transcendental phenomenological approach used, with reasoning for a qualitative approach, followed by the three research questions for studying law enforcement officers' experiences with EAP. The setting included multiple law enforcement agencies in Central Florida counties. The participants were inclusive of active and retired law enforcement officers who experienced direct exposure to critical incidents (traffic fatalities, homicides, child deaths, and in-custody deaths, among other events that might shock one's consciousness) and used an EAP provided by their employer. The process involved interpreting data collected from semistructured interviews with participants. The study explored law enforcement officers' lived experiences and beliefs about EAP after a critical incident. The researcher engaged in data triangulation, ensured avoidance of researcher bias, and provided ethical considerations. Obtaining Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval before gathering data affirmed the study's credibility and validity. The researcher's trustworthy role was crucial in ensuring the accuracy of participants' responses, which the researcher transcribed.

## **Design**

This study utilized a phenomenological approach to a qualitative research design. Various qualitative designs could have been selected; however, phenomenological was best suited to capture the participants' lived experiences. A transcendental phenomenological research design was chosen to explore the human experiences of active and retired law enforcement officers and their beliefs, attitudes, and involvement with EAP (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study explored the participants' ability to navigate the divide between themselves and others and how they view the world (Callaway et al., 2020). Moustakas (1994) described phenomenology as seeking to understand human experiences by exploring phenomena and how they relate.

Philosopher Edmund Husserl defined the concept of phenomenology as a scientific approach to consciousness by which a perceptual experience is described as the subject views it (Beyer, 2013). The overall task is to obtain a clear description of how things appear to an individual (Yee, 2019). Their lived experiences make them consciously aware of the world around them. Bracketing one's experiences is necessary to better understand the participants' human experiences (Bekele & Ago, 2022). Husserl described bracketing as preventing perceptual researcher errors in phenomenological specifications to avoid assumptions and consequentially bracketing intents to prevent research bias (Heotis, 2020).

Furthermore, the researcher consciously planned to set aside prior experiences and ideas of using the EAP program through bracketing (Yee, 2019). According to Husserlian phenomenology, bracketing is essential while collecting data and coding the information (Reiners, 2012). The researcher understood there was a possibility for bias; however, bracketing helped the researcher to be consciously in tune with one's attachment to the subject. Heotis

(2020) opined that it is vital throughout the process that the researcher be reminded about bracketing and solely allow participants the freedom to provide descriptive experiences.

Although Husserl introduced setting aside biased beliefs and judgments, Moustakas (1994) encouraged examining things with natives and a new set of eyes to connect with the world. Noema is described as not the actual object but the appearance of such (Moustakas, 1994). It reflects “what or which” is experienced by the participants (Moustakas, 1994, p. 69). The transcendental phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to explore multiple perspectives without prejudice. Noema is the phenomenon under research that participants experienced, for which they provided a detailed description. Moreover, the researcher examined the central focus and meaning of the lived experiences of law enforcement officers. Moustakas emphasized that the researcher focuses on the participants’ detailed descriptions of the noema rather than making assumptions about the relativity of the phenomenon itself.

This approach established a natural meaning to the phenomena by allowing the officers to share their EAP experiences through their unique lens. A transcendental phenomenological research design was selected to enable the researcher to answer the central research question and subquestions about the officers’ lived experiences. Although transcendental phenomena are not absolutes (Patton, 2015), they serve to purely explain the lived experiences of the participants’ views and interactions, making them very real within their beliefs (Heotis, 2020). The officers’ accurate perceptions of their interactions and exposures with an EAP after a critical incident are their natural attitudes and logical experiences.

The hermeneutic view expanded Husserl’s work by Martin Heidegger, who described the meaning of phenomenology in everyday social and psychological contexts (Neubauer et al., 2019). The sensibility of the research is what helped to articulate the phenomena. Hermeneutic



phenomenology was critical to interpreting the participants' descriptions and constructing the meaning of phenomena. In this study, the researcher's opinion was irrelevant to the phenomena; therefore, it was not considered. The research focused on accurately describing the law enforcement officers lived experiences utilizing EAP after a critical incident. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained the types of qualitative designs as phenomenological, ethnography, case study, grounded theory, and narrative. In this study, transcendental phenomenology was the best design to describe the officers' human experience of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018), which was law enforcement officers' experiences and perspectives toward using an EAP in the aftermath of a critical incident.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were used to understand the phenomena in question best:

#### **Central Research Question**

What are the lived experiences of law enforcement officers who used employee assistance programs (EAPs) after a critical work-related incident?

#### **Subquestion 1**

What do law enforcement officers perceive as barriers to accessing employee assistance programs (EAPs) after a critical work-related incident to address stress-related issues?

#### **Subquestion 2**

What do law enforcement officers believe are the tangible benefits of employee assistance programs (EAPs) after a critical work-related incident?

### **Setting**

A qualitative design was appropriate to understand the lived experiences of law enforcement officers in Central Florida who utilized an EAP after a critical incident. The rationale for the setting was based on the need to give a voice to law enforcement officers from diverse agencies who have experienced a critical incident in which they used an EAP.

The researcher selected Central Florida for the study because of its robustness and large local, state, and federal law enforcement presence protecting the region. The area is well-known for being the home of popular tourist attractions such as Walt Disney World, Universal Studios Orlando, SeaWorld Orlando, Legoland, Kennedy Space Center, Busch Gardens Tampa, and Daytona International Speedway. It is one of the most visited places in the United States due to the number of visitors frequenting the state's theme parks and beaches. As a result of the busy tourist season, the potential for critical incidents requiring law enforcement responses is excellent. The main metropolitan areas in Central Florida include Orlando, Tampa, and Daytona Beach.

In 2022, the U.S. Census described Orlando as the most significant metropolitan city in Central Florida, with approximately 316,081 residents. While generally regarded as a safe place to live, the state has faced notable critical incidents in the last decade, including the 2016 Pulse Nightclub mass shooting, multiple cases in which suspects killed officers, the 2018 Stoneman Douglas High School mass shooting, post-George Floyd protests, unusual hurricane-related responses, and increased attacks on law enforcement officers that resulted in their deaths. The critical events resulted in law enforcement from various agencies jointly responding to apprehend the person responsible for the attacks or providing recovery support for disruptions of law enforcement services. As a result of the critical incidents, officers were likely referred to

their agencies' EAP to address the stressful events of the scenes. Understanding the commonly shared experiences of law enforcement officers may influence policy changes and provide executives with information on how best to support mental wellness support for officers.

### **Participants**

The purposeful sample population consisted of 11 active and retired law enforcement officers who had used EAP mental health services after experiencing a critical incident. Purposeful sampling is often utilized in qualitative research to gather rich information about the phenomenon (Palanikas et al., 2015). The researcher established a recruitment criterion to seek diverse law enforcement representation. Such requirements in qualitative research are used to acquire helpful information from the selected predetermined criterion of importance (Patton, 2002). To be eligible for the study, the participants must have been at least 19 years old (the age to become employed as a Florida certified law enforcement officer) without a maximum age (Florida Department of Law Enforcement, n.d.), an active or retired Central Florida law enforcement officer that used an EAP after a critical incident. To be a member of the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) in Florida, an individual must have been appointed or elected full-time or a retired law enforcement officer with arrest power and employed by a government agency (FOP, n.d.).

A screening survey was used to identify eligible participants for the study. The researcher initially implemented a purposeful sampling method to broadly seek potential participants by screening and selecting based on their interview responses. The criteria for participation in the study called for active and retired law enforcement officers in Central Florida who used EAP services after a critical incident. Participants were selected based on their eligibility and

willingness to discuss their perceptions and lived experiences with EAP services (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Moustakas, 1994).

Participants were identified based on their responses to the screening survey; upon determining they experienced the phenomenon, the researcher scheduled a virtual interview with the participants at a convenient time. Maximum variation ensured a diversified sample of participants to provide information-rich responses to the semistructured interview questions (Patton, 2002). The screening survey inquired about the participants' affiliated agency level (state, local, federal, and specialized), age, race, ethnicity, gender, years of service, assignment type, and use of an EAP after a critical incident (Table 1). Pseudonyms were utilized for participants' data tracking. Affiliations with organizations and locations were generalized to eliminate the risks of participants being identified. Demographic questions were solicited; however, the participants' responses were optional, and information was only used if relevant to the phenomena. Once participants completed the screening questions and consented to participate in the study, eligible participants were contacted by the researcher to schedule a convenient time to participate in a Zoom interview. Before beginning the interviews, participants were asked to acknowledge their electronic submission of the consent form, which included a confidentiality guarantee and the option to terminate their participation at any time throughout the study.

**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

| Pseudonym | Race/ethnicity         | Sex    | Assignment                   | Years of service | Rank       |
|-----------|------------------------|--------|------------------------------|------------------|------------|
| Alpha     | Black (Hispanic)       | Male   | Patrol, investigations, SWAT | 26               | Officer    |
| Bravo     | White                  | Female | Patrol, investigations       | 20               | Officer    |
| Pseudonym | Race/ethnicity         | Sex    | Assignment                   | Years of service | Rank       |
| Charlie   | White (Hispanic)       | Male   | Patrol                       | 12               | Sergeant   |
| Delta     | Black                  | Male   | Patrol, investigations       | 28               | Officer    |
| Echo      | White                  | Male   | Patrol, investigations       | 34               | Lieutenant |
| Foxtrot   | White                  | Male   | Patrol, SRO                  | 15               | Officer    |
| Golf      | White                  | Male   | Patrol, investigations       | 18               | Sergeant   |
| Hotel     | White                  | Male   | Patrol, investigations, SWAT | 22               | Lieutenant |
| India     | White                  | Male   | Patrol, investigations       | 20               | Officer    |
| Kilo      | Asian/Pacific Islander | Male   | Patrol, investigations       | 33               | Officer    |
| Lima      | White                  | Male   | Patrol, K9, SWAT             | 28               | Sergeant   |

**Procedures**

Before collecting data for this study, approval was obtained from the Liberty University IRB (Appendix A). The researcher obtained a signed agreement between the researcher and the FOP, District 7, that granted permission for the researcher's recruitment flyer and an email letter to be distributed to members of the FOP using the organization's membership database. The FOP District 7 is a well-established sworn law enforcement members-only labor union representing active law enforcement officers and those members who have retired. The FOP District 7 is a not-for-profit regional organization that manages police and sheriff law enforcement lodges

within Central Florida, which includes Brevard, Citrus, Hernando, Lake, Marion, Orange, Osceola, Seminole, Sumter, and Volusia counties.

After receiving IRB approval, the researcher shared the recruitment flyer and email letter with the FOP, who emailed the forms to active and retired law enforcement officers in various ranks and positions using their database. If the aggregate number of participants was not achieved using the described procedure, participants were asked to share the study information with other officers or groups they believed might have experienced the phenomena without sharing their participation. This method of snowball sampling recruitment allowed participants to share the participant recruitment flyer within their law enforcement circles (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants could have decided to share with other law enforcement-specific groups, such as social media and organizations specific to the targeted population. The researcher's rationale was to recruit the sometimes-skeptical law enforcement officers reluctant to share information.

The participant recruitment flyer (Appendix B) and email letter described in detail the purpose of the study, contact and school information about the researcher, the potential benefits and risks of participating in the study, and the approximate time it would take to complete the interview, including checking the accuracy of the transcript within three days of receipt. The recruitment flyer and email letter displayed a direct link and quick response (QR) code to access the screening survey.

Interested participants answered screening questions and completed the online informed consent form before agreeing to be contacted for participation in the study. The screening questions were administered using a Google document, deemed an appropriate instrument for this type of research. Participants were required to respond to the screening questions to allow

the researcher to determine their eligibility. After the screening, participants were asked to provide contact information to enable the researcher to schedule a convenient Zoom interview.

After the interviews, the participants were asked to review the transcripts to ensure accuracy. Since the study did not achieve the minimum number of eligible participants in this hard-to-reach population (Simkus, 2023), the participants were asked to share the recruitment flyer and email letter with other law enforcement officers who may have experienced a critical incident and utilized EAP services. After their interview, the participants received a virtual \$25 Amazon gift card to their email addresses.

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

The researcher's role in this qualitative study was relevant in soliciting information from participants about their experiences using EAP. The challenges of work-related stress can affect job performance and interactions with community members. Employers contract with an EAP to assist their employees with job-related stress. The researcher found that various employer-sponsored mental health programs may suffice for numerous occupations but sought to understand if an EAP addresses law enforcement officers' mental health needs after critical incidents. Limited research is available for other types of helping professions and scarcely explores law enforcement professionals' lived experiences using an EAP after a critical incident (Grant et al., 2019). Law enforcement officers' occupational experiences are expected to differ from other professions due to their responsibility as first responders who frequently witness first-hand traumatic events.

The researcher was aware of her own experiences using an EAP and understood the potential for bias that could have influenced the study. As a veteran law enforcement officer who has experienced critical incidents, the researcher had personal experiences and was aware of her

thoughts and perceptions about EAP. The researcher attempted to reduce any opportunity for bias to occur by reflectively journaling and note-taking during the interviews to eliminate bias from personal experiences. Holmes (2020) opined that research includes a degree of subjectivity despite various attempts to remain objective. In this study of law enforcement officers' lived experiences, the researcher utilized a transcendental phenomenological design and bracketed the researcher's personal experiences. Neubauer et al. (2019) described epoché (bracketing) as self-awareness of bias throughout the study's data collection and analysis. This researcher recorded the participants' interviews and followed protocols that reduced opportunities for personal bias. The relationship between the researcher and the participants was strictly professional and unbiased. The researcher had professionally utilized EAP services but had no direct ties with agencies or providers. Additionally, the researcher sought participants from various law enforcement agencies because she was an active law enforcement officer working in Central Florida.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection was qualitative, including semistructured interviews with law enforcement officer participants. To achieve saturation, eight to 10 participants were needed for a 60- to 90-minute semistructured interview. Creswell and Poth (2018) supported the idea that a phenomenological study's reasonable sample size may range from five to 25 participants. The semistructured interviews were conducted with selected participants who agreed to share their experiences with the researcher. The interviews were recorded with each participant's consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed. Informed consent was explained and obtained from each participant before proceeding. The researcher disclosed the minimal risks and the option to opt out to the participants at any time throughout the process.



## Interviews

Conducting interviews with active and retired law enforcement officers from various agencies with EAP experience after a critical incident provided an opportunity for more diverse experiences. The recorded interview questions were built on the developed interview guide founded on the trauma constructs of constructive self-development theory (Appendix C). The theory emphasized personal growth and resilience following the officers' experiences using EAP after a critical incident. Semistructured questions were asked of each participant to invoke deep and reflective responses to their lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). While the interview questions were predetermined, probative questions were not; they were meant to elicit in-depth responses from the participants. Phenomenological research relied on interviews with participants; therefore, the researcher selected semistructured interview questions for flexibility in participants' responses. Semistructured, open-ended interview questions were essential to the data collection process, allowing the participants to elaborate on their lived experiences. This method was best suited to enable participants to describe their meaning of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Detailed participant responses are essential to qualitative research (Yin, 2018). The study's open-ended questions were designed to learn about the thoughts and experiences shared by the participants to enrich the qualitative study (Yin, 2018).

The recorded interview was scheduled for a session between each participant and the researcher. This method of interviewing was convenient for the participants to share, allowed the researcher to record the sessions, and securely store the interviews for later viewing and transcription. The researcher encouraged participants to ensure they selected a comfortable, safe, and quiet interview location. Each interview was conducted on Zoom to ensure the researcher could securely store the data in a secured folder on a password-protected computer.

The participants' responses to the interview questions helped to identify common themes within the data and establish the study's credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The open-ended interview questions were grounded by supporting literature and are as follows:

1. Greetings, how are you today?
2. Please briefly introduce yourself to me as if we just met.
3. Describe your experience using an employee assistance program after a critical incident.
4. Explain how you perceived the agency or coworkers after the critical incident.
5. What were your feelings and thoughts about citizens after the critical incident?
6. Explain how you constructed the meaning and purpose of job performance after the critical incident.
7. What are your beliefs about utilizing EAP services for law enforcement mental wellness?
8. Describe how EAP services affected your view of the critical incident.
9. How did sharing your critical incident with an EAP counselor make you feel?
10. What do you believe are barriers to accessing EAP services?
11. Explain what you believe are the benefits of using EAP services.
12. Describe how EAP services helped you restore control over your stress or cope with job-related challenges.
13. What other experiences or perceptions about EAP would you like to share with me that we have not already discussed?

The 13 semistructured, open-ended questions were nondirectional to capture the participants' experiences by exploring the central phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each

question was structured to elicit honest responses from the participants about their lived experiences with the phenomena (van Manen, 2016). Questions 1 and 2 established rapport-building questions that allowed the interview to flow into a natural conversation to put the participant at ease after describing their critical incident (Patton, 2015). Rapport-building was essential to ensure the environment adequately hosted the participants throughout the study (Moustakas, 1994). Question 3 inquired about the participants' exposure to critical incidents, which explores the officers' emotional reactions that possibly interfere with their ability to perform their duties (Carleton et al., 2019). Questions 3 through 5 were noncontroversial questions that allowed the participants to speak freely about their law enforcement roles and professional relationships (Patton, 2015).

Additionally, Questions 3 through 12 were crafted to obtain detailed descriptions of the phenomena that cannot be captured in numbers (Patton, 1990). The questions were structured to uncover the human, emotional, and social aspects to strengthen the qualitative inquiry (Patton, 1990). The questions provided an understanding of all the factors through inductive analysis of the participants' accounts of their realities with an EAP. Questions 4, 5, and 6 were aimed to understand the participants' cognitive development (experiences) of the world around them (Piaget, 1978). Questions 7 through 12 were focused on the phenomena by probing the participants about the essence of the EAP (Moustakas, 1994). The questions were produced to investigate the issues deeply, intended to reveal the officers' experiences with EAP that quantitative surveys will not (Patton, 1990). Each question allows the researcher to engage the participants about their feelings, beliefs, thoughts, and ideas about EAP. Question 13, the final interview question, was intended to solicit additional information the participants believed might be relevant to the study. Adequate time was given to each participant to answer each question.

The information was documented to ensure future researchers understand the officers' lived experiences.

The study used a qualitative research design to ask semistructured, open-ended interview questions. The interview questions were well-suited to capture the reflections and emerging themes of the officers' experiences. This type of interview allows the formulation of a narrated account of their considerations with quoted statements, resulting in reliable results. DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) revealed that semistructured interviews are commonly used in qualitative research designs. Galletta (2013) supported the format because it establishes a formatted dialog between the interviewer and participant. The interview questions were prestructured based on information necessary to answer the research questions (Kallio et al., 2016).

The interactions between the researcher and participants allowed freedom of expression to facilitate conversations about the participants' perceptions and beliefs about the phenomena. For this study, the researcher structured the questions based on information gathered from previous literature to seek a better understanding of the officers' experiences, thoughts, and ideas. Bearman (2019) revealed the complexities of composing interviews that solicit detailed descriptions for qualitative researchers. This study included a 3-step approach for successful interviews, including consideration of the phenomena of interest, composing intuitive questions that encourage natural conversation, and scheduling a series of follow-up reviews (Bearman, 2019).

The researcher transcribed the interviews using Rev.com for expedience and accurate accounts of the participants' experiences. Member checking occurred as part of the analysis process, allowing each participant to review their interview transcripts for accuracy and

reliability (Creswell & Poth, 2024). The researcher provided each participant with their audio recording and typed document for review and clarification. The participants were granted up to 3 days to review their transcripts and return their edit recommendations to the researcher.

### **Data Analysis**

The interview information was the primary source of data for this study. The initial stages of the analysis included transcription, reading through each interview response for each question (i.e., reading all responses to the first interview question and then reading all responses to the second interview question, and so on), and making notes within the document. Open coding occurred based on the keywords and phrases that emerged in the participants' responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher reviewed the responses again to refine the open codes into structural codes, which were categorized based on the research questions (Saldaña, 2021). For example, responses that represented barriers or benefits formed structural codes.

The second level of analysis was the creation of themes based on the structural codes and their alignment with the themes in the literature. This step involved the researcher finding common structural codes aligned with higher-level themes (e.g., lack of sufficient support at work). In addition to the researcher's generated themes, a pre-trained large language model known as *bart-large-mnli*, published by Facebook (Lewis et al., 2019), was used to determine the probability of a subset of text aligning with a specific phrase or theme. The model was used as a source of inter-rater reliability and triangulated with the classifications made by the researcher. Probabilities above .75 (over 75% likelihood) were classified as aligning with a given theme. For example, suppose the theme is a lack of sufficient support at work, and the text fed into the model (e.g., interview response) indicates a greater than .75 probability of alignment with that theme. In that case, the text is assumed to support that given theme. Lower probabilities of .50

(50%) closely align with the theme. The number of responses or codes supporting each theme was compared between the researcher and the generative AI model. Quotes from the original transcripts were used to support the generation of themes, and the final themes were used to provide a narrative addressing overarching research questions.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was essential to the study to sustain its relevance. Its relevance supports adding new knowledge to the law enforcement profession. This study aimed to understand the meaning of the phenomena using data that were analyzed to add meaning to the words and observations of the participants (Adler, 2022). The study's analysis utilized participant interviews to ensure reliability and comprehensiveness. Conveying what the researcher hopes to learn from the study is reflexivity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher incorporated reflexivity throughout the study by reflecting on her biases and assumptions. In addition, the researcher conveyed the relevance of her background and the potential to influence the study to demonstrate transparency by providing her biographical information to the participants (Patton, 2002). The researcher was conscious of the potential influence that could affect the study results, and the information was clear before data collection. In the case of this study, the researcher expressed a personal interest in the topic due to holding a position as a law enforcement executive. However, the researcher garnered the law enforcement participants' interest in understanding the phenomenon (Merriam, 1995). Their expertise enhanced the study's credibility and ensured the information was honest and integrity was maintained. Additionally, the researcher's background was a positive attribute because the hard-to-reach participants could relate to the researcher, knowing the researcher has likely experienced the phenomenon of using an EAP after a critical incident.

**Credibility**

Credibility was established by using Zoom to record the interviews, followed by the researcher transcribing them and identifying phrases that formulated themes. The researcher's background and experiences were essential to data collection and analysis (Patton, 2002). The reoccurring patterns identified in the participants' responses to the interview questions established the study's validity and dependability. Probative questions during the interviews served to clarify the participants' words or give more context to their responses when the researcher thought it necessary. The participants shared their experiences with an EAP after a critical incident, and the researcher thoroughly documented their responses. Utilizing member checks with each participant ensured their interviews accurately reflected the meaning of their thoughts, beliefs, and experiences, which provided a method of reliability and validation of the results. Additionally, each participant had an opportunity to review their interview transcripts to add, delete, or clarify data within their transcripts to ensure it accurately reflected their perspective for credibility.

**Dependability and Confirmability**

The researcher focused on specific issues and demonstrated the participants' stability regarding their experiences with an EAP after critical incidents. Dependability and confirmability are similar to reliability in quantitative studies and deal with consistency, which is addressed by providing rich details about the context and setting of the study. In an effort to avoid the potential for researcher bias, the collected data were reviewed to confirm the analysis method and how it was interpreted. The format helped to reduce the possibility of biased judgment or interpretation of data analysis. All the interview questions used for the study were open-ended and formulated to elicit responses specific to the study. Each participant's law

enforcement experiences were relevant and essential to the research. The researcher's reflexive approach throughout the interviews affirmed that the study's findings are dependable and confirmed.

### **Transferability**

Transferability is another aspect of qualitative research that should be considered; it refers to the possibility that what was found in one context should be applied to another. The researcher documented detailed descriptions of the study that can be straightforwardly replicated. The study was conducted in Central Florida, sampling 11 active and retired law enforcement participants. The same research can be accomplished in any vicinity using active or retired law enforcement officers with similar backgrounds and experiences. A comprehensive description of the study and its conclusion were incorporated to enhance the transferability of the study's findings. The researcher recommends that future studies include law enforcement beyond the Central Florida area to establish transferability.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were given throughout the interview process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The participants were all granted their consent to participate in the research. The study was not intended to influence the participants in any way. Husband (2020) revealed that consideration for the balance of power and change in the participants' behaviors postinterview is essential to achieve informed consent. The current design was constructed to elicit law enforcement officers' responses about seeking professional help for their mental health issues and their experiences seeking an understanding of their engagement with an EAP. The officers were asked to share their stories; information was recorded and later coded.



The catalyst for the research was to understand law enforcement officers' perspectives and experiences with an EAP after a critical incident.

### **Informed Consent**

All precautions were taken to ensure the participants' identities were not compromised within the research findings or other aspects of the dissertation. The researcher asked the FOP to distribute the participation flyer to solicit participants. The regional FOP representative received information regarding the nature and purpose of the study and signed an agreement with the researcher. The participation flyer described the nature and parameters of the study to allow participants to understand their eligibility. When participants accessed the link or QR code displayed on the flyer or email, they were directed to the screening survey, a Google Document that listed the consent to participate, and the screening questions. The potential participants read and submitted an electronic signature and date before proceeding to complete the screening questions. Additionally, the participants agreed to be contacted by the researcher to schedule the online interview if they were qualified. The screening survey informed everyone that their participation was voluntary and that they could opt-out at any time.

### **Confidentiality**

Confidentiality was maintained by de-identifying transcripts and storing data securely. Given the sensitive nature of the discussions, counseling resources were recommended if necessary. Participants' responses were kept confidential; only the researcher had access to the participants' responses. Participation was strictly voluntary, and the participants' names were only known to the researcher. The researcher used pseudonyms when referring participants for coding purposes and study results. Using pseudonyms within the study maintained the

participants' confidentiality by avoiding using their actual names. The researcher was obligated to protect all participants' identities and safety.

There was no reason to withhold information about the researcher's findings; no participants experienced physical or mental harm and did not suffer any punitive recourse if they decided not to participate in the research study. More importantly, the researcher kept all information obtained about the participants on an encrypted removable thumb drive locked in a secured cabinet. The researcher will destroy all the data about the participants 3 years after the publication of the research study results. The researcher contacted the participants who volunteered for the study, scheduled interviews if the requirements were met, and provided the transcriptions for review and editing.

## **Resources**

Although nothing in this study was intended to harm the participants, given the nature of the research topic, resources were recommended for any participant who believed they needed assistance. Additionally, Lifeline 9-8-8 is a free, 24-hour, 7-day-a-week mental health resource reserved for supporting participants who felt they needed to speak to someone regarding any negative impacts triggered by the study. The researcher and the FOP support the resource for law enforcement officers who believe they need emotional, behavioral, and mental health support.

## **Summary**

This transcendental phenomenological study provided insight into the perspectives of active and retired law enforcement officers on EAP utilization after critical incidents. The semi-structured interview questions probed the participants for in-depth responses regarding their experiences, beliefs, and barriers encountered using EAP services. The setting in Central Florida was chosen due to the various types of critical incidents law enforcement officers faced in the

last decade. Participants were screened using an emailed letter and flyer disseminated by the FOP, District 7, using their membership email database. After completing the online informed consent and screening survey, participants submitted their contact information to allow the researcher to contact them to schedule online audio and optional video interviews. The researcher used a snowball sampling approach by asking each participant to share the research information with other law enforcement officers. Data collected through semistructured interviews with open-ended questions were analyzed to identify keywords and develop structural codes aligned with the research questions using a large language model to identify and generate themes. The researcher checked rich details and inter-rater reliability to ensure trustworthiness. Ethical considerations included collecting informed consent, guaranteeing confidentiality, and recommending mental health resources if requested. The study's findings informed the development of evidence-based interventions and policies to promote officers' perceptions and experiences through improved EAP access and engagement throughout their careers.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of Central Florida law enforcement officers who utilized EAPs following a critical incident and contribute to the knowledge base within the field. Law enforcement professionals exposed to critical workplace incidents often refer to an EAP to manage stress-related issues.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the research participants and present the data analysis findings to address each research question. The codes were generated through open and deductive coding. The subthemes, the emergent major themes, and supporting quotes from the participants are presented and discussed. After presenting the results, each research question is addressed in narrative form based on the themes that emerged from the interviews.

### **Participants**

A total of 11 participants were interviewed for this study. The researcher assigned each participant a pseudonym to keep their identities confidential. This chapter section provides descriptions of each participant to lend insight into their role within their respective law enforcement organization and their overall persona. Age and personal characteristics that do not compromise their confidentiality are presented if shared by the participants during their interviews.

#### **Alpha**

At the time of the study, Alpha was 53 years old. He was born in New York but has resided in Orlando since his family moved there when he was nine. Alpha is college-educated and spent some time in the Army Reserves, where he was part of Desert Storm. He was

interested in becoming a police officer, so when he was 21, he applied. He was hired by a municipal police department, where he served 26 years and retired in 2019. While at the department, Alpha worked on undercover assignments and served on the special weapons and tactical (SWAT) team. He experienced three critical incidents during his tenure, with the third being extreme. After retirement, he worked for about another year and a half in related criminal justice jobs but was unhappy. He found that he was very passionate about mental health and now works full-time in the mental health field. Alpha has a strong support system, including his family members and significant other.

### **Bravo**

At the time of the study, Bravo was 53 years old. She left after 20 years on the job but returned to a non-sworn professional position for the previous two years. She was living at home with her mother and her dog and caring for her mother. During her tenure on the job, Bravo experienced a critical incident in 2004, which happened relatively early in her career.

### **Charlie**

At the time of the study, Charlie had 12 years on the job as a law enforcement officer in Central Florida, where, early in his career, he experienced an officer-involved shooting and an innocent person was killed. As a result, his agency mandated him to seek EAP services. Charlie professed a strong support system with his coworkers and family and through his strong Christian faith. Charlie felt his job was part of a bigger calling. As he explained, “We do what we do because of the bigger calling, you know, and that is to, to help people that can’t help themselves and to stop evil from, uh, continuing to, to do what they do.”

**Delta**

At the time of the study, Delta was 55 years old and had been in law enforcement for over 28 years. Prior to being a law enforcement officer, he was a firefighter paramedic for eight years. Delta attempted to get help on his own and reached out to UCF RESTORES (a center for trauma-related care at the University of Central Florida) but had a negative experience; he is the exception because he was the only one who expressed a negative experience with UCF RESTORES. He ended up doing research on his own to figure out how to help himself, and he also opened up to his peers for support. Delta's career as a firefighter and police officer caused him to see "the absolute worst that humans can do to other humans." Delta believed that the trauma he experienced made him a better officer, which he felt was the opposite of what happens to most officers.

**Echo**

At the time of the study, Echo had recently retired from law enforcement after 34 years. He spent approximately nine years at a previous law enforcement agency and another 25 years with a municipal police department. As a law enforcement officer, he has been in many different units. Echo mentioned that he probably experienced three critical incidents while on the job. Echo sought help from an EAP but not through the department because he never really had that internal trust to go through the department. He always paid for it through his own insurance.

**Foxtrot**

Foxtrot is a male law enforcement officer who, at the time of the study, had been an active officer for 15 and a half years and has only had two assignments. He has served as both a patrol officer and a school resource officer (SRO) and is currently an active SRO. Foxtrot had a

significant critical incident involving an officer shooting, which took place back in the beginning of 2016.

### **Golf**

At the time of the study, Golf was 39 years old and had been a police officer for approximately 18 years. Golf was married with two kids and a dog. He had been with his wife for 20 years and married for 14 years. During his tenure as a law enforcement officer, he worked undercover for about six and a half years cumulatively, and he also worked in homicide for about two and a half years.

### **Hotel**

At the time of the study, Hotel was 44 years old and had been a member of the police department for the past 22 years. Hotel has worn a lot of hats. He had worked in [redacted] in every bureau at the department as a patrol officer, an FTO (Field Training Officer), and a SWAT team member. Hotel's critical incident involved an officer shooting.

### **India**

India retired from law enforcement after 20 years in 2021 and then sought work in the private sector, taking on a different career than law enforcement. While in law enforcement, India served in the uniform patrol, uniform drug unit, and canine unit, was a detective for 11 years, and was a SWAT team member for seven years.

### **Kilo**

At the time of the study, Kilo was turning 62 years old and had been in law enforcement for almost 34 years. He spent his first 26 years working for a large agency in a metropolitan city and then moved on to a smaller agency located in more of a university setting. Kilo was working as a part-time police consultant there, about 5 to 7 months a year. During his off months, he

teaches and travels around the country. He also served in the U.S. Air Force for about 11 or 12 years before he became a law enforcement officer. Kilo witnessed four major incidents.

### **Lima**

Lima is a male who retired after almost 29 years of law enforcement experience, including working in the canine unit. Prior to serving as a law enforcement officer, Lima was in the Army for eight years. Lima has seen several critical incidents, such as the use of deadly force and tragedies (e.g., dead babies and children from car crashes). While in the Army, Lima was deployed overseas as a combat military policeman. Lima loved working in the field, and he loved being a true first responder and helping people.

### **Findings**

This section of the chapter provides the data analysis findings from the interviews. The first two interview questions provided background context for the interview, and Questions 3–13 were analyzed for themes. The first part of this section features the manually identified codes and the subthemes and major themes that emerged from those codes. Selected quotes from the interviews are provided as supporting examples. The results from the large language model are presented after the manual data analysis results. For each subtheme that was manually identified, the model's score was calculated for each interview question to indicate the strength of the linkage between the interview responses for that question and the subtheme. Scores of zero indicate no linkage, and scores of 1 indicate a 100% likelihood of linkage. After the data analysis results are presented, each research question is addressed in narrative form.

### **Coding Results and Theme Development**

The codes identified in the interview responses were grouped into subthemes, and then significant themes were generated. The manually coded themes and subthemes were not linked



to specific interview questions because many applied to multiple questions; the data were analyzed holistically. However, a result was generated for each interview question when using the large language model to obtain probabilities.

### ***Theme 1: EAP is Not Effective***

The first theme presented pertains to EAP being ineffective. The subthemes and codes are presented in Table 2. The main issues that caused an EAP to be ineffective for the participants of this study included a lack of trust and competence, just checking a box and therefore not actually treating the individual, and making it difficult to get help.

**Table 2**

### ***Theme 1: EAP is Not Effective***

| Subtheme                      | Code   |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Incompetent                   | Not considering type of incident<br>Not dealing with cumulative and complex trauma   |
| Just checking a box           | Not allowing time to heal<br>Focus is on getting cleared to go back to work<br>No attempt to provide therapy to heal   |
| Make it difficult to get help | Having to call ten people to get help<br>Getting the runaround<br>Lack of sense of urgency   |
| Doing more harm than good     | Put bad taste in mouth because of negative experience<br>May cause officer to shut down  |
| Agency taking the cheap route | Take lowest bidder<br>Lack of professionalism<br>Not culturally competent<br>Counselors do not appear to care about you<br>Possibly overwhelmed by very high case load |
| Lack of trust                 | Concerns about confidentiality<br>Concerns about capability to work with first responders  |

One of the reasons for lack of competence pertained to not being trained to work with first responders or not being culturally competent. For example, Golf described how his EAP counselor was not culturally competent:

And he had no background in law enforcement, didn't work in the military. Um, you know, it just felt like if this person hasn't walked in my shoes or in similar shoes, there's no way they could understand what we see or deal with. He could be empathetic. Um, but I think after a critical incident, you want somebody who maybe has been there, done that. Mm-hmm. And somebody who can really dive deep and tell you what to sort of expect after a critical incident, what you may feel. Mm-hmm. You know, this person was kind of just, "Hey, this is what I was taught and, you know, I read this in a book." It's not from his own experience or from what, you know, um, what he, they, they've experienced, you know?

Alpha described his experience with an EAP as a "cookie cutter" process without focusing on his individual experience. He indicated that the services do not address the unique experiences of the officer:

Yeah, so, so the, the rumblings were like, okay, so I'm not the only one that, that...had just a bad experience, or not a, is that the right word? A bad experience or just, just it was a very, uh, cookie cutter. Very, what it sounds like from the rumblings, Uhhuh sounded very cookie cutter, sounded very, uh, rubber stamped, you know, uhhuh kind kind of thing. Just, uh, asking these, uh, very, and, and we got into it enough to say that it's like the same kind of questions were asked for everybody. So, and I would think in that type thing, I get it. Like, you're gonna ask me how I'm feeling, and that's probably gonna be everybody saying that, but I would think we would go down our own road, you know?

Right, right. And some of the questions would veer depending on what's being said.

Comparably, Lima explained the following:

Uh, I can't, um, describe one that was even close to being helpful. Not one counselor that I ever spoke to was helpful. Uh, knowing what I know now because I have spoken with counselors that are trained in speaking with first responders, I truly now see the difference.

The participants indicated that the EAP process after a critical incident is really just checking a box to clear the officer to go back to work. It does not appear to be intended actually to provide counseling or therapy. For example, Bravo stated, "Basically go in and tell them that you're fine and that everything is good so that they would clear you to go back to work."

Likewise, Golf talked about checking a box as well as a lack of professionalism:

Um, the experience was, I don't know, it felt very mechanical. It felt, um, really just checking a box. Um, you know, the, the therapist himself, uh, no fault of his own, was just kind of an odd guy. Um, you know, and we as cops, like, we take everything into account for his physical appearance, his mannerisms, his, you know, speech. Even a cadence to the speech. Speech. It [was] just speech. Everything was really off. I, you know, I got to the, to the appointment and was standing in this empty small office that felt very enclosed.

Delta provided an example of how getting help from EAP can be challenging:

Yeah. I, I, and when I did try to, to, to, to contact, I really, I, I, I kind of got the runaround the, I may, maybe I wasn't calling the, the right people, but it, it actually took me a minute to, to find out who to even call, who to go to and Mm-Hmm. And how to get it approved through the city, self-insured and all that kind of stuff. It was, it was kind of, it was kind of a headache. And, and if I was in a really bad state at that time, I actually

probably would've bailed because even, even when, when I found out about it [EAP]...so you have the stigmatism of going.

Interestingly, a few comments in the interviews suggested a need to focus on the identity crisis that happens when one is relieved of duty, given that officers did not sign up for an alternative duty assignment, and they feel bad when their badge is taken away even if they did not do anything wrong. For example, Echo said,

I always thought, you know, you don't allow the job to take your personality over, but in reality, the job does take your personality over. And so that became, and that's when I first realized my identity was now attached to that.

And when the captain went to take his badge, Echo felt like "he was starting to take my identity away from me." Likewise, India said the following:

As standard operating procedure, you know, they, they take your weapon, they take your badge, which makes an officer feel like he did something wrong. So, they took me back to the station where they wanted to interview me, and, and I, I'll still re . . . I'll never forget this. They asked me how long I've been on, and I said, "14 months." He goes, "Good, you're off probation." I'm like, good, I'm off probation. Okay. Um, so that was, kind of took me aback and I'm like, uh, okay.

### ***Theme 2: Intervening Factors***

The second theme that emerged related to intervening factors, and the subthemes and codes associated with this theme are featured in Table 3. The intervening factors fell into negative and positive categories with incident-related attributes playing a moderating role. It is important to note that the participants' responses about positive and negative intervening factors

were not always what they experienced but, in some cases, what they believed law enforcement officers experienced in general.

**Table 3***Theme 2: Intervening Factors Influencing the Relationship Between Incidents and Outcomes*

| Subtheme                    | Code   |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Individual open to help     | Wanting to receive help<br>Believing that it is okay to seek help  |
| Positive culture            | Culture of normalizing mental health   |
| Support system              | Having someone who can relate to your experience<br>Trust or support from the civilian community<br>Informal conversations with fellow officers<br>Family intervention and encouraging to get help<br>Emotional intelligence of coworkers to anticipate triggers |
| Old school mentality        | Belief that you need to just keep going and pretending to be okay<br>Belief that you cannot show weakness<br>You should not have taken the job if you cannot handle it   |
| Public opinion              | Second guessing what you did<br>Media portraying things in a negative way  |
| Prosecution process         | Prosecution of the criminal<br>Prosecution of the law enforcement agent  |
| Failure to communicate      | Not providing an explanation for the process   |
| Suppressing trauma response | Not dealing with the trauma can lead to abusive behavior   |
| Triggering situations       | Situations that remind officer of incident   |
| Dynamics of incident(s)     | Special characteristics of the victims (e.g., children)<br>Relating to the victim(s) in some way (e.g., victim as son's age)<br>Magnitude or severity of the incident<br>History of incidents or cumulative trauma   |

Some positive intervening factors were whether or not the individual wanted to get help, a more recent trend of normalizing mental health, and having support systems in place (e.g., family, friends, and coworkers). For example, Alpha referenced the support system he had between his father, his son, and his significant other:

So it wasn't until, it wasn't until, uh, you know, my dad called me out, you know, and, and, and we had our moment, which I'm ashamed of. Uh, but then that's when I, I, I had my, my rock bottom moment.

One of the negative intervening factors included the department's old-school mentality where an officer will be perceived as weak if they seek help. Therefore, officers tend to just keep going and pretend to be okay. For example, Echo explained the following:

It's just that old school mentality that I, I started out with, um, you know, having, having retired in management, I understand the confidentiality, it, it exists. Um, but maybe it's that, that, um, that perception that we can't show weakness.

Another negative intervening factor that sometimes influences the officer's perception or experience of the incident is the prosecution process, which can take months. Depending on the situation, the officer might need to remain off duty until the process is over, and in some cases, there may be negative interactions with the public. For example, Foxtrot described the following:

Uh, I purposely stayed off, you know, social media and the internet, or obviously the internet, but the news and stuff. Um, obviously I had, you know, I let my family know. I had one friend that was actually, you know, one of my good friends was the best man at my wedding. I called him to let him know. And he told me that, I guess there was some people trying to, um, pull the race card saying that it was, you know, a racially motivated shooting. But I think it got squashed and in general, 'cause she was a white female, and it was two, two black males and she was the one driving.

Kilo also described the effects on the family:

Um, what didn't help, I think is, um, my kids were going to school. They're very young at the time, and a lot of people, a lot of teachers and parents saw this in the news. And, um, um, the kids were kind of bothered about it because they were, you know, that was your dad. That was your dad on TV and all that.

With that said, public opinion and interactions with the public can be positive, negative, or neutral; it is not always a negative factor. For example, Hotel said, “It made me feel good. It made me feel like we were impacting the community, and they stood behind us.”

One interesting finding that emerged from the interviews was the phenomenon of law enforcement officers not managing their history of trauma, which can cause them to become abusive as officers. For example, Echo explained the following:

I’ve always felt that a lot of the, the abuse that we’ve seen in law enforcement has come from individuals that, um, at some point in their life experienced something traumatic and they never dealt with it. Um, I, I, I’d be interested in knowing how many of the, the events that have been made public, where there was abuse by law enforcement, how many of them prior to that had been involved in a traumatic incident. Um, I, I think if, if there was a way that we could sell EAP to law enforcement and show that there’s really no disadvantage to attending and taking care of your brain, we really could make a big difference.

Finally, the dynamics of the incident can exacerbate negative effects; for example, if there is severe trauma such as the Pulse nightclub incident, if the officer identifies with the victim in some way, and/or if the victim has certain attributes (e.g., babies and children). Having a history of trauma plays a role because there can be a cumulative effect over time. When multiple factors are in play, the trauma may become more complex. For example, India stated the following:

But if you take all these pebbles and you keep beating the water up, and it makes ripples and ripples and ripples, he said, you know, if you think of everything else as a pebble, and then this is this giant rock on top of it, you know, eventually the water gets disturbed.



### ***Theme 3: Changes in Beliefs or Behaviors***

The third theme that emerged pertained to changes (or lack of changes) in how law enforcement officers perceive their job and the public (e.g., citizens or civilians) after the critical incident. The codes and subthemes in Table 4 indicate that beliefs and behaviors did not always change.

**Table 4**

#### *Theme 3: Changes in Law Enforcement Officers' Beliefs or Behaviors Post Critical Incident*

| Subtheme   | Code  |
|--|---|
| No changes in perceptions or behavior                | Nothing changed, stayed the same  |
| Incident changing the way the officer thinks or acts | Officer becomes more compassionate with citizens<br>Changes in decision-making (e.g., not shooting right away, second-guessing)<br>Officer are more cautious post-critical incident |

The hotel explained the following:

I mean, I, I think I realized you kind of, you kind of take the job like just in stride, and you get used to just getting, I mean, I worked in a, you know, that that was a pretty high crime area where we dealt with people. You know, we took three or four people a day to jail, ran after people, chased after people, you know, a lot of uses of force. But it kind of really put a lot of things into perspective with how quickly things can go bad and how quickly, you know, if things, if, if it's a game of inches, and if things went six inches south for me, you know, it's a different story. And I'm, I might not be here today. Mm-Hmm. I mean, I had my vest on and everything else, but, uh, who knows where that round goes and what happens, you know, he was right over my shoulder. If he moves it to the left a little bit, he hits my face. So, um, yeah, it's, it, it definitely, uh, changed the way I, the way I looked at my profession.

In some cases, the officer became more cautious. For example, Hotel stated, “It didn't really impact, it, it didn't really change the way I did, did things other than the fact that I was a little more cautious. I was more aware of the dangers that are out there.” Similarly, Kilo said,

Um, as far as, um, my policing, um, I don't think it changed much. Uh, as far as how, how I treated citizens or how, uh, how I responded to calls. Um, I think I was just a little bit more cautious.

In some cases, the incident caused participants to become more compassionate with civilians.

For example, Echo explained the following:

‘Cause I remember up until that shooting, um, I, I had that, that cop mentality, you know, gotta face the doors of the restaurants, carry my off-duty gun. I needed to make sure I got my ID. I mean, that whole process. And after the shooting, um, that wasn't the part of my process anymore. You know, I, I was like, I didn't always carry him off-duty gun. Um, I'd carry my, my ID and my badge, but I wouldn't always carry my off-duty gun. And if I couldn't sit facing the door, it wasn't that big of a deal. I liked to sit facing the door so I could see what was coming in. But if I couldn't, I didn't have a cow. Um, the department never published my picture, which really helped a lot. Um, it did make a paper. I still have a newspaper clip of it. Um, you know, and I made sure to call my family to let them know I was okay. Before when I got, that was one of the first things I did when I got home. Um, but as far as the citizens are concerned, I think somewhat, it gave me a little more compassion for the citizens.

#### ***Theme 4: Barriers to Accessing EAP Services***

The fourth theme pertained to barriers to accessing EAP services. The subthemes and codes in Table 5 indicate that fear of consequences related to stigmas, being relieved of duty, and

being ostracized are reasons why many officers do not seek EAP services or external services in many cases.

**Table 5**

*Theme 4: Barriers Associated With EAP Services*

| Subtheme                                   | Code   |
|--|--|
| Fear of consequences of using EAP services | Fear of being ostracized                           |
|  | Afraid of the stigma associated with it            |
|  | Lack of trust, particularly around confidentiality |
|  | Fear of being relieved of duty                     |
| Not open to receiving help                 | Think they do not need help                        |
|  | Not open to receiving constructive feedback        |
| Lack of confidence in EAP                  | The idea of EAP is good, but execution is not      |
|  | EAP reputation of being ineffective                |

Delta expressed the following sentiment:

So you have the stigmatism of going, like, you, you wanna keep that quiet, like you don't want anyone to know. Um, so you have that, and then once you try to go through the process, finding it, and then going through the process and you have to call this person and then it has to get approved, and then we'll give you a call back. And it was, it was kind of a headache where if I was on the extreme stress and pressure at, at that time, I absolutely would have bailed and not thought twice about it.

Other barriers included not being open to help because they think they do not need it (e.g., "I'm fine" mentality) and/or they are not open to receiving constructive criticism. For example, Charlie described the following:

Um, maybe the feedback, uh, that they're getting, you know, they don't want to hear it.

Um, maybe they don't want to be told that, Hey, you need to seek some, some, some, you know, maybe medication. You know, people are maybe opposed to that, right? Maybe

they don't wanna be told that, Hey, you need to look in the mirror. You know, maybe it's not your employer's fault. Maybe it's not your spouse's fault. Maybe it's your fault. And those are things that are difficult. Uh, for anybody, you know, to, to want to, I don't want to hear that. You know, I remember, you know, the, the issues that I had overcoming my, uh, incident. Some of it, uh, again, when I got into the, the, the point of like doubt and, and, um, I got into a really, you know, bad place.

Finally, a lack of confidence in EAP services is a barrier because, in many cases, the officers do not even bother seeking help because they believe that it will be ineffective. For example, Lima said, "And the biggest thing that comes out of the podcast that I watch is getting qualified counselors. That's the biggest issue." Similarly, Alpha explained the following:

I think we should have with, with EAP, other resources available. Um, and, and for a bunch of different reasons, I, I, I, I know for a bunch of municipalities that EAP is a, uh, a service that is, uh, farmed out to the lowest bidder, you know? And, and, and with that means you get the most inexperienced people, you know? Um, and, and the, the, the buzzwords now in the industry are that they're not culturally competent.

#### ***Theme 5: The Potential of EAPs or Other Service Providers***

The fifth and final theme pertained to the potential of EAP, or the benefits of other service providers that are more culturally competent, effective, and professional (see Table 6).

**Table 6***Theme 5: Potential of EAP or Other Service Providers*

| Subtheme   | Code   |
|--|--|
| EAP could be leveraged for other services                  | Marriage counseling<br>Adoption of a child<br>Substance abuse counseling   |
| There are potential benefits of EAP post critical incident | Intervention is important and necessary<br>Getting impartial feedback<br>Getting a different perspective<br>Seeing things more clearly |
| Need to improve EAP services                               | Train counselors to work with first responders<br>Should model UCF RESTORES  |
| Continual normalizing of mental health                     | Perceptions are and have been changing over the recent years   |

Several of the participants referenced an external service provider called UCF RESTORES, and the feedback was exceptionally positive. For example, Alpha said, “So, um, but I, I saw, I went out myself and I went back to UCF RESTORE and, uh, that, that changed my life.”

One interesting subtheme that emerged pertained to the need to normalize seeking mental health services. For example, Delta explained the following:

We are gonna go up and people are gonna be all, all defensive and they’re not gonna go. Whereas if it was an annual, you know, just like our drug, just a random drug, drug test, Hey, you randomly been selected to go. Okay. So if you make it more like that, it, it’s not so much of a, of a, of a stigmatism. It’s not so much of a oh oh, oh, they, they think I’m crazy type of thing.

### **Results From Large Language Model: Linkage of Interview Questions to Themes**

The large language model described in chapter 3 was used to validate and assess the extent to which each subtheme corresponded to each research question. Table 7 lists the

subthemes in alphabetical order with their respective pseudonyms. As can be seen in Table 7, 25 subthemes generated the five major themes described previously in this chapter.

**Table 7**

*Subthemes and Corresponding Pseudonyms*

| Subtheme  | Pseudonym |
|---|-----------|
| Agency taking the cheap route                                   | S1        |
| Continual normalizing of mental health improves benefits of EAP | S2        |
| Doing more harm than good                                       | S3        |
| Dynamics of incident  | S4        |
| EAP could be leveraged for other services                       | S5        |
| Failure to communicate  | S6        |
| Fear of consequences of using EAP services is a barrier         | S7        |
| Incident changed the way the officer thinks or acts             | S8        |
| Incompetent   | S9        |
| Individual open to help   | S10       |
| Just checking a box   | S11       |
| Lack of confidence in EAP is a barrier                          | S12       |
| Lack of trust   | S13       |
| Make it difficult to get help                                   | S14       |
| Need to improve EAP services to be beneficial                   | S15       |
| No changes in perceptions or behaviors                          | S16       |
| Not open to receiving help is a barrier                         | S17       |
| Old school mentality  | S18       |
| Positive culture  | S19       |
| Prosecution process   | S20       |
| Public opinion  | S21       |
| Support system  | S22       |
| Suppressing trauma response                                     | S23       |
| There are potential benefits of EAP post-incident               | S24       |
| Triggering situations   | S25       |

These pseudonyms were generated to serve as a reference for Table 8. The results from the large language model are provided in Table 8 for Interview Questions 3–13. Again, the scores represent probabilities and can range from 0–1, with 1 indicating a 100% probability. High probabilities were defined as probabilities of 0.75 or above, indicating that the model

assigned a 75% likelihood or greater that the subtheme relates to the interview question. Low probabilities were defined as probabilities below 0.50, indicating that the model assigned a probability below 50% that the subtheme relates to the interview question. However, it is important to note that a low probability does not necessarily mean the subtheme is irrelevant. It is possible that the participant simply did not mention that concept when responding to that specific question.

**Table 8**

*Large Language Model Subtheme Scoring by Interview Question*

| Sub-theme | Q3   | Q4   | Q5   | Q6   | Q7   | Q8   | Q9   | Q10  | Q11  | Q12  | Q13  |
|-----------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| S1        | 0.66 | 0.45 | 0.50 | 0.44 | 0.50 | 0.81 | 0.39 | 0.53 | 0.29 | 0.38 | 0.52 |
| S2        | 0.75 | 0.67 | 0.60 | 0.64 | 0.74 | 0.59 | 0.63 | 0.70 | 0.75 | 0.78 | 0.64 |
| S3        | 0.64 | 0.52 | 0.60 | 0.68 | 0.56 | 0.63 | 0.63 | 0.54 | 0.19 | 0.54 | 0.55 |
| S4        | 0.86 | 0.82 | 0.91 | 0.92 | 0.86 | 0.74 | 0.86 | 0.91 | 0.78 | 0.89 | 0.86 |
| S5        | 0.97 | 0.92 | 0.92 | 0.90 | 0.95 | 0.92 | 0.92 | 0.95 | 0.95 | 0.92 | 0.94 |
| S6        | 0.76 | 0.62 | 0.69 | 0.71 | 0.71 | 0.39 | 0.81 | 0.76 | 0.48 | 0.72 | 0.71 |
| S7        | 0.73 | 0.65 | 0.59 | 0.64 | 0.67 | 0.60 | 0.74 | 0.71 | 0.55 | 0.65 | 0.78 |
| S8        | 0.89 | 0.85 | 0.91 | 0.87 | 0.81 | 0.68 | 0.82 | 0.83 | 0.79 | 0.87 | 0.82 |
| S9        | 0.86 | 0.53 | 0.62 | 0.50 | 0.74 | 0.74 | 0.53 | 0.60 | 0.24 | 0.54 | 0.69 |
| S10       | 0.94 | 0.92 | 0.93 | 0.86 | 0.95 | 0.77 | 0.94 | 0.96 | 0.95 | 0.96 | 0.87 |
| S11       | 0.77 | 0.62 | 0.59 | 0.51 | 0.64 | 0.76 | 0.32 | 0.64 | 0.29 | 0.49 | 0.54 |
| S12       | 0.81 | 0.67 | 0.65 | 0.66 | 0.73 | 0.40 | 0.76 | 0.79 | 0.54 | 0.69 | 0.82 |
| S13       | 0.81 | 0.68 | 0.76 | 0.70 | 0.75 | 0.32 | 0.68 | 0.75 | 0.44 | 0.64 | 0.70 |
| S14       | 0.83 | 0.77 | 0.79 | 0.76 | 0.76 | 0.86 | 0.77 | 0.85 | 0.43 | 0.71 | 0.81 |
| S15       | 0.82 | 0.59 | 0.57 | 0.59 | 0.75 | 0.82 | 0.61 | 0.75 | 0.54 | 0.62 | 0.76 |
| S16       | 0.17 | 0.19 | 0.26 | 0.32 | 0.15 | 0.94 | 0.04 | 0.17 | 0.01 | 0.14 | 0.23 |
| S17       | 0.57 | 0.44 | 0.35 | 0.44 | 0.61 | 0.73 | 0.59 | 0.70 | 0.30 | 0.50 | 0.55 |
| S18       | 0.70 | 0.56 | 0.63 | 0.65 | 0.73 | 0.63 | 0.60 | 0.76 | 0.46 | 0.63 | 0.61 |
| S19       | 0.58 | 0.47 | 0.52 | 0.56 | 0.65 | 0.04 | 0.40 | 0.61 | 0.49 | 0.52 | 0.49 |
| S20       | 0.77 | 0.52 | 0.61 | 0.53 | 0.68 | 0.69 | 0.38 | 0.66 | 0.24 | 0.41 | 0.55 |
| S21       | 0.85 | 0.73 | 0.88 | 0.79 | 0.82 | 0.97 | 0.74 | 0.80 | 0.67 | 0.73 | 0.75 |
| S22       | 0.84 | 0.77 | 0.78 | 0.76 | 0.81 | 0.61 | 0.82 | 0.82 | 0.75 | 0.80 | 0.75 |
| S23       | 0.84 | 0.72 | 0.75 | 0.75 | 0.75 | 0.38 | 0.69 | 0.75 | 0.51 | 0.76 | 0.69 |
| S24       | 0.97 | 0.93 | 0.95 | 0.93 | 0.97 | 0.53 | 0.97 | 0.98 | 0.99 | 0.94 | 0.93 |
| S25       | 0.70 | 0.63 | 0.71 | 0.73 | 0.70 | 0.82 | 0.73 | 0.76 | 0.50 | 0.68 | 0.66 |

Question 3 on the interview protocol stated, “Describe your experience using an employee assistance program after a critical incident.” The scores for Question 3 indicate that most subthemes were likely associated with this question. These subthemes include normalizing mental health, dynamics of the incident, potential to leverage EAP for things other than a critical incident, failure to communicate, incident changed the way the officer thinks or acts, EAP being incompetent, individual open to help, just checking a box, lack of confidence in EAP, lack of trust with EAP, making it difficult to get help, need to improve EAP services for it to be beneficial, prosecution process having a negative effect, public opinion playing a role, importance of a support system, suppressing trauma response, and there are potential benefits of EAP post the critical incident. The subtheme with a relatively low probability included no changes in perceptions or behaviors.

Question 4 stated, “Explain how you perceived the agency or coworkers after the critical incident.” The scores indicate that there was a more comprehensive range of values. The subthemes that had a relatively higher association with this question included dynamics of the incident, EAP could be leveraged for other services, incident changed the way the officer thinks or acts, individual open to help, make it difficult to get help, public opinion played a role, importance of support system, suppressing trauma response, and there are potential benefits of EAP post the critical incident. The subthemes with relatively low probabilities include agency taking the cheap route, doing more harm than good, need to improve EAP services to be beneficial, no changes in perceptions or behaviors, not open to receiving help, old school mentality, positive culture, and prosecution process.

Question 5 asked, “What were your feelings and thoughts about citizens after the critical incident?” The results indicate that the subthemes with relatively strong linkage to that question



include dynamics of the incident, EAP could be leveraged for other services, incident changed the way the officer thinks or feels, individual open to receiving help, lack of trust, make it difficult to get help, public opinion played a role, support system was important, suppressing trauma response, and there are potential benefits to EAP post critical incident. The subthemes with low probabilities include no changes in perceptions or behaviors and not being open to receiving help.

Interview Question 6 asked participants to “Explain how you constructed meaning and purpose in job performance after the critical incident.” The subthemes with relatively high probabilities include dynamics of the incident, EAP could be leveraged for other services, incident changed the way the officer thinks or acts, individual open to help, make it difficult to get help, public opinion played a role, support system was important, suppressing trauma response, and there are potential benefits to EAP post critical incident. The subthemes with low probabilities include agency taking the cheap route, no changes in perceptions or behaviors, and not open to receiving help.

Interview Question 7 asked, “What are your beliefs about utilizing EAP services for law enforcement mental wellness?” The results indicate that the subthemes with high probabilities include dynamics of the incident, EAP could be leveraged for other services, incident changed the way the officer thinks or acts, individual open to receiving help, lack of trust, make it difficult to get help, need to improve EAP services to be beneficial, public opinion played a role, support system was important, suppressing trauma response, and there are potential benefits to EAP post critical incident. The subtheme with a very low probability was no change in perceptions or behaviors.

Question 8 was, “Describe how EAP services affected your view of the critical incident.”

The results indicate that the subthemes with high probabilities include agency taking the cheap route, EAP could be leveraged for other services, individual open to help, just checking a box, make it difficult to get help, need to improve EAP services, no changes in perceptions or behaviors, public opinion plays a role, and triggering situations. The items with low probabilities include failure to communicate, lack of trust, positive culture played a role, and suppressing the trauma response.

Question 9 asked, “How did sharing your critical incident with an EAP counselor make you feel?” It is important to note that in some cases, the participant sought help from an external resource outside of EAP. The results indicate that subthemes with high probabilities include dynamics of the incident, EAP could be leveraged for other services, failure to communicate, incident changed the way the officer thinks or acts, individual open to help, lack of confidence in EAP, make it difficult to get help, support system was helpful (this was typically outside of an EAP), and there are potential benefits of an EAP post critical incident. The low probability subthemes include agency taking the cheap route, just checking a box, no changes in perceptions or behaviors, positive culture, and prosecution process.

Interview Question 10 asked, “What do you believe are barriers to accessing EAP services?” The results indicate that the high probability subthemes include dynamics of the incident, EAP could be leveraged for other services, failure to communicate, incident changed the way the officer thinks or acts, individual open to help (e.g., not being open is not a barrier), lack of confidence in EAP, lack of trust, make it difficult to get help, need to improve EAP services, old school mentality, public opinion, support systems, suppressing trauma response,

there are potential benefits of EAP post critical incident, and triggering situations. The low probability subtheme was no change in perceptions or behaviors.

Interview Question 11 was, “Explain what you believe are the benefits of using EAP services.” It is important to note that when participants responded to this question, they were not specifically limiting their responses to EAPs. Some discussed the benefits of external resources such as UCF RESTORES. The subthemes with high probabilities include normalizing mental health, dynamics of the incident, EAP could be leveraged for other services, incident changed the way the officer thinks or acts, individual open to help, support systems are helpful, and there are potential benefits of EAP post critical incident. The subthemes with low probabilities include agency taking the cheap route, doing more harm than good, failure to communicate, EAP being incompetent, just checking the box, lack of trust, make it difficult to get help, no changes in perceptions or behaviors, not open to receiving help, old school mentality, positive culture, prosecution process.

Interview Question 12 was, “Describe how EAP services helped you restore control over your stress or cope with job-related challenges.” The results indicate that the high probability sub-themes include normalizing mental health, dynamics of the event, EAP could be leveraged for other services, incident changed the way the officer thinks or acts, individual open to receiving help, support system, suppressing trauma response (dealing with), there are potential benefits of EAP post critical incident. The low probability subthemes include agency taking the cheap route, just checking the box, no changes in perceptions or behaviors, and prosecution process.

Finally, Interview Question 13 asked, “What other experiences or perceptions about EAP would you like to share with me that we have not already discussed?” The results indicate that

the high probability subthemes include dynamics of the event, EAP could be leveraged for other services, fear of consequences of using EAP services, incident changed the way the officer thinks or acts, individual open to receiving help, lack of confidence in EAP, make it difficult to get help, need to improve EAP services, public opinion plays a role, support systems are important, there are potential benefits of EAP post critical incident. The low probability subthemes were no change in perceptions or behaviors and positive culture.

### **Results for Subquestion 1**

What do law enforcement officers perceive as barriers to accessing employee assistance programs (EAPs) after a critical work-related incident to address stress-related issues?

Based on the data analysis findings, stigma associated with an old-school mentality is the primary barrier. With that said, it appears that in recent times, the stigma is more self-imposed because the officer feels that they took on this job and, therefore, they should be able to handle it without needing mental health interventions. However, more recently, the profession has recognized the importance of mental health and breaking down systemic barriers.

Another significant barrier is the lack of trust that the EAP counselors maintain confidentiality, and officers fear the consequences of seeking help. For example, participants feared that they would be deemed unfit for service if they expressed the need or desire for additional assistance and consequently be pulled from service. This poses issues from a personal identity standpoint and some financial problems.

Most participants felt that some form of intervention or treatment is needed after a critical incident, and in some cases, on a regular cadence. However, most participants do not think EAP is implemented effectively because it is not comprehensive enough (e.g., they check the box), and the person has no experience with the situation (e.g., counselors lack cultural competence).

**Results for Subquestion 2**

What do law enforcement officers believe are the tangible benefits of employee assistance programs (EAPs) after a critical work-related incident?

The data analysis findings suggest that participants were not likely to experience benefits from EAP after a traumatic work incident. However, if done well and if they sought assistance from external sources, the benefits include having someone to talk to who can relate to your situation, which helps with being able to sleep again at night, getting stuff off your chest, and understanding that what you are feeling and going through is normal. Some specific helpful therapy techniques that participants mentioned included eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) and chunking, which pertains to a method where the individual breaks significant details into smaller chunks, making them easier to process.

**Results for Central Research Question**

What are the lived experiences of law enforcement officers who used employee assistance programs (EAPs) after a critical work-related incident?

The data analysis findings indicate that the experiences of law enforcement officers who use EAPs are neutral at best, with many citing negative experiences. Law enforcement officers generally do not trust the agency-provided EAP services due to a lack of trust in confidentiality and competence. Law enforcement officers experience prolonged, cumulative, and complex trauma that needs to be addressed by counselors who have experience and competency working with first responders. Some of the main themes pertained to just checking a box, no follow-up, lack of cultural competency, lack of competency in general, and, in some cases, lack of professionalism. Participants described EAP as a process to check a box to get back to work; the services are not designed to help officers deal with their trauma or heal. With that said, the

participants in this study were all aligned that help is needed in many cases and that help can be obtained through resources outside of the agency (e.g., UCF RESTORES).

### **Summary**

This transcendental phenomenology study focused on the findings and described the experiences of Central Florida law enforcement officers who utilized an EAP after a critical incident. Through a targeted focus on understanding the law enforcement officers' lived experiences, perceptions, and interactions with EAP services, this research served as an attempt to fill the gap between law enforcement officers' mental well-being support needs and the actual utilization of EAP services. The methodology adopted in this study required a detailed research approach in which the narratives of 11 participants, each adding to the study's findings with different perspectives and individual experiences, have been examined. The analysis showed that the participants' experiences with EAP services were diverse, but overall, they revealed the EAP's ineffectiveness for participants. A critical analysis of the interviews led to the identification of five major themes: EAP is not effective, intervening factors influencing the relationship between incidents and outcomes, change in law enforcement officers' beliefs and behaviors post critical incident, barriers associated with EAP services, and potential for EAP and other service providers. Through these themes, as well as subthemes and codes, the picture of the multifaceted challenges and perceptions of EAP use among law enforcement officers after experiencing critical work-related incidents was depicted.

The most notable finding of this research was the undeniable impression that the EAP was ineffective on superimposed factors such as lack of trust, cultural incompetence, and the generic, comprehensive approach that bypassed the peculiar needs of police officers and failed to address their unique experiences. Participants frequently expressed feelings of disenchantment

with the process and that most of the time, the EAP service was just a box they had to check rather than a real source of support or healing. The participants' narratives showed the importance of continuously developing a culturally sensitive, targeted, and focused approach that considers the challenges that law enforcement officers experience. Although intervening factors, from the good to the bad, were identified as vital parameters that operated in designing the relationship between critical incidents and their consequences, the relationship was unclear. While factors such as mental health normalization and support systems were among the positive ones, a few other reasons, like the old-school mentality and the fear of stigma faced by the officers, stood out negatively, as the phenomenon is very complex. The research explored the essential challenges of accessing EAP programs in great detail, uncovering confidentiality issues, being shunned, and shallow effectiveness. These barriers discouraged officers from seeking the needed support and demonstrated the importance of this gap between EAP objectives and the community police perception.

Contrary to this, examining the power of EAP and other service providers highlighted the reality of people who realize they are the lucky ones and find what they need out of the typical EAP organizational structure. The commendation of the UCF RESTORES illustrates the massive impact of the culturally sensitive and specialized support that cannot be downplayed in the recovery and general wellness of the officers. In summary, this study showed the wide range of problems law enforcement officers experience when utilizing EAP after critical events. The research outcome illustrates the need for a review of the EAP services to ensure that these are applicable, sensitive, competent, and supportive of the psychological well-being of law enforcement officers. By overcoming the identified EAP services obstacles and using tremendous power and potential to support the proper initiatives, a brighter future can be

achieved, more support and understanding of officers' stress and where the community receives the most professional law enforcement professionals they need to serve and protect their needs.



## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

This phenomenological study examined the experiences of Central Florida law enforcement officers who utilized an EAP after a critical incident. The research was inspired by an attempt to find the perceptions and interactions of law enforcement officers who utilized an EAP after a critical incident. The study was driven by the idea that despite the urgent need for mental wellness and the availability of such services for law enforcement officers, a notable lack of EAP services was used even after critical incidents. The main research issue was the gap in the literature, which focused exclusively on exploring the lived experiences of law enforcement officers who used EAPs after critical work incidents. The study was focused on a central research question that aimed to reveal the lived experiences of the officers dealing with the aftermath of critical incidents with the help of an EAP. Two subquestions were used to probe into the nuances of the participants' realities. Subquestion 1 was aimed to determine perceived barriers that prevented law enforcement officials from accessing EAP services when they encountered any incident-related stress issues after a critical incident. Such exploration aimed to uncover the diverse range of difficulties an officer had to deal with, from stigmatizing attitudes toward mental health treatment-seeking to the logistical obstacles or even the lack of trust in the confidentiality and effectiveness of the offered services.

Subquestion 2 highlighted the concrete benefits the participants identified from EAP services after they underwent a critical work-related incident. A second element of the study aimed to understand the positive aspects of work and the support law enforcement officers could receive from an EAP, including emotional and psychological relief, coping strategies, and overall well-being and job satisfaction. Recognition of these advantages is essential for

measuring EAP services' contribution to the recovery process and building strengths. The goal of the study was to fully explain law enforcement officers' experiences and perceptions of EAPs in light of critical incidents through the central research question and two subquestions. The findings also presented a mixed story, describing the challenges that prevent officers from seeking help and the benefits that can promote their mental health. This research contributes to the pool of knowledge by suggesting improvements in EAP practices, which are specialized to cater to the customs of law enforcement officers. The results highlight the need for policy reform and cultural change within law enforcement agencies to assist better those who protect and serve the community.

### **Summary of Findings**

While summarizing law enforcement officers' experiences utilizing EAPs after a critical incident, the research findings underscore a general skepticism toward agency-provided services due to concerns about confidentiality, cultural competence, and overall effectiveness. The study's results indicate an apparent necessity for more specialized, empathetic, and competent support for officers dealing with the aftermath of critical incidents. The central research question and subquestions that guided the study were as follows.

#### **Central Research Question**

What are the lived experiences of law enforcement officers who used employee assistance programs (EAPs) after a critical work-related incident?

#### **Subquestion 1**

What do law enforcement officers perceive as barriers to accessing employee assistance programs (EAPs) after a critical work-related incident to address stress-related issues?

**Subquestion 2**

What do law enforcement officers believe are the tangible benefits of employee assistance programs (EAPs) after a critical work-related incident?

The process of examining the exact perceptions, obstacles, and concrete gains or losses—whether there are any—related to the service delivery of these programs after the trauma is experienced was highlighted throughout this investigation. The study illuminated the severe gap between the real purpose of EAPs and the officers' actual experiences, indicating a situation where the program often falls short of delivering on its proclaimed purpose. Data analysis involving EAPs revealed the underlying idea of ineffectiveness, which has multiple factors that complicate and minimize the program opportunity probability. Participants overwhelmingly shared a critical view of EAPs that resulted from past recollections of ineffectiveness, the program viewed as only formalistic ("just checking a box"), and a desire for cultural competence within the services provided. The detail that proves the main problem of cultural competence is that without being in the shoes of law enforcement officers or military personnel, an EAP counselor could not understand the day-to-day experiences those in such occupations face. Alpha's criticism of the EAP services as deficient in customization and engagement relates to this notion, stressing a widespread system failure to make care more personal and involve the unique trauma settings of law enforcement officers. Lima's most significant issue with the EAP was "getting qualified counselors," stating they are the "most inexperienced people" and "not culturally competent."

The interaction of the principal themes increases the complexity of the participants' perceptions of EAP as they neither positively nor negatively affected their experiences with the program. In one instance, the data reflect a trend of normalizing mental health services in the law

enforcement community, which indicates a culture that could change and stop the stigma around seeking help that historically exists. Alpha's account of his family and supportive friends emphasizes the enormous power role played by interpersonal relationships in the journey of resilience after trauma. While "old school" thinking and stigma are not going away, they still loom as powerful obstacles, perpetuating the cultural values of indifference over mental health. This study outlined the barriers to EAP usage, including stigma, concern over job repercussions, and prevailing lack of confidence in the confidentiality and expertise of EAP services. The frustration that Delta explained when accessing EAP support is a situation in which the system is not responsive to the immediate needs of officers in emotional distress. The anxiety that looking for help may result in being classified as unfit for duty shows a profound concern about identity and job security; therefore, there is a need for systemic reform to safeguard the rights and dignity of officers when they need to seek mental health assistance.

Despite the considerable criticism that the effectiveness of EAP services receives, the findings indicate some potential for EAP to provide meaningful support if drastically reformed. Notably, it demonstrates the importance of identifying external resources, such as the UCF RESTORES program mentioned by several participants, as a valuable alternative to usual care. Such specialized and culturally sensitive care should be tailored to the needs of the law enforcement community. The transformative effect of EMDR therapy on the participants reveals the different modalities that can be implemented in EAP frameworks to improve effectiveness. Thus, the purpose of this study was to serve as an essential lens to examine the effectiveness of EAPs for law enforcement officers. The idea behind EAPs, providing mental wellness support in crises, is crucial, but the actual practice is unfortunately deficient. Implications indicate the re-organization of mental health services for law enforcement, which involves the development of

programs that are not only culturally appropriate but also easily accessible, personalized, and capable of dealing with the complex trauma encountered in police work.

### **Discussion of the Empirical Literature**

The findings of the study support previous studies about the low usage of EAPs by law enforcement officers and the barriers to accessing the services after traumatic experiences. For example, the current findings correlate with Jetelina, Molsberry et al. (2020), mentioning that few officers access EAPs, notwithstanding its benefits. The themes discussed here, including the perception of EAPs as inadequate and the barriers law enforcement officer officers face in utilizing these services, coincide with the literature that emphasizes stigma toward mental health treatments within police culture (Grupe, 2023; Gutschmidt & Vera, 2020). In addition, Martin et al. (2021) and Papazoglou, Marans, et al. (2020) examined the difficulties related to confidentiality and career impact concerns, which were also validated by the anonymity and cultural competency issues encountered in this study. Positively intervening factors of research, such as normalizing mental health support in policing, were seen to complement the works of Galanis et al. (2021) and Lucia and Halloran (2020), who stated increasing administrative willingness to discuss job stressors as part of transparency. Nonetheless, the token “old school” instances and fear of being looked down on still line up with Newell et al. (2022) and Ricciardelli et al. (2020), revealing that the actual problem is the cultural and systemic barriers to the acceptance of EAPs.

Contrary to empirical research, Jetelina, Molsberry et al. (2020) proposed a more blended understanding of the reasons behind law enforcement officers’ underutilization of EAP services. The present study differs from the other studies that concentrated on the effectiveness of EAP, confidentiality issues, and cultural gaps in law enforcement agencies. This study provides a

comprehensive analysis of the nature of the limitations and offers more in-depth insight than the previous general views. This study thus expands the empirical literature by incorporating officers' personal experiences and perceptions of EAP, which consequently contribute to understanding why and how EAP utilization remains low. For instance, the current findings confirm the sentiments of Martin et al. (2021) and Ricciardelli et al. (2020) concerning stigma and confidentiality issues. However, the current study uncovers the culture and systemic challenges within law enforcement that further compound the problem and offer a more comprehensive perspective than in the existing literature.

### **Discussion of the Theoretical Literature**

The results of this study are thoroughly aligned with the constructivist self-development theoretical framework in which the theoretical literature on the concept is discussed. This theory argues that people produce understanding and knowledge due to their experiences and emphasizes the active role of learning in personal development (Piaget, 1978; Saakvitne et al., 1998). The views and opinions of law enforcement officers concerning EAPs, the notions of ineffectiveness, and barriers to access show a discrepancy between the supposed performance of this type of program to support the officers' mental health and the accurate implementation of such programs. This gap is suggestive as it creates the need for a modern, practical, and culturally sensitive EAP.

Furthermore, the study's highlighting of both the influential and the impeding facets during the interaction of law enforcement officers in attachment to EAP contributes meaningfully to the theory by making it clear how the cultural and social backgrounds of the individuals under discussion are used to shape their meaning-making processes (Saakvitne et al., 1998). Constructivist self-development theory emphasizing personal and social contexts as

indispensable elements of learning and management is certainly evident, with the accounts of law enforcement officers serving as a powerful illustration, mainly because of a shift in the culture of policing toward a greater emphasis on mental health; this has not yet managed to overcome the prevalent stigma. This study aligns with the constructivist self-development theory, emphasizing the need for specialized intervention and acknowledging that law enforcement work is different for everyone and has cultural and operational issues. These results confirmed the theory that active learning and personal growth through active participation in a specific context are essential to successfully processing and dealing with stress and trauma (Roberts et al., 2022; Saakvitne et al., 1998). Notably, it enriches the theoretical debate by highlighting the application of the concept of law enforcement officers' participation in EAPs following critical incidents, therefore contributing to a more complex narrative on how the processes work and what determines success or failure in program engagement.

Although constructivist self-development theory established a theoretical basis for this investigation, the research revealed the validation of theoretical flexibility concerning the context of law enforcement EAP application. This technique underscores that individuals develop their cognitive skills and coping mechanisms from past experiences. However, there are significant differences between the theory and reality. This separation signifies a shift from the model that mere exposure to an EAP need not result in officers changing their perceptions and developing coping skills. This research on constructivist self-development theory goes beyond the empirical role of EAPs in employees' personal development and uncovers the complex relationship between law enforcement officers' experiences and cultural and organizational environments. This relevant study was focused on reflective practices and the culture of law enforcement, which forms the officers' behaviors, as posited by Saakvitne et al. (1998). For instance, data

suggest the theory may describe a complex organizational and cultural change, indicating that law enforcement agencies must devise a supportive notion of improving EAP services.

Moreover, the theoretical literature extends constructivist self-development theory by referring to law enforcement officers' perceptions of EAPs following critical incidents. The constructivist self-development theory supports how individuals build their experiences into realities and learn through experiences that could trigger posttraumatic personal and professional development (Piaget, 1978; Saakvitne et al., 1998). This study shows the conditions surrounding an encounter between EAP and law enforcement officers and the dynamic rooted in individual cognitive characteristics and systemic and cultural barriers within the police system. While earlier investigations illuminated the barriers to EAP implementation in the workplace, this study went much deeper into the subject. It shed more granular light on the process' culturally specific, psychological dimensions. Such interaction explains how the main constructivism principles, like self-driven learning and adaptation, are influenced by policing areas outside a law enforcement officer's immediate control. Notably, this implies that the study is a unique bridge between the theoretical potential and practical confirmation of EAP effectiveness within a highly stressful line of work (Jetelina, Beauchamp, et al., 2020; Richards et al., 2021).

This study pinned down literature on vicarious traumatization in the way officers' repeated exposure to trauma affects not only their mental health but also their propensity and capacity to seek help (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Self-development theory was used with empirical data in this study to enhance the perception of EAP utilization from the officer's perspective. Consequently, EAP services need to be designed with the considerations of access, sensitivity to cultures, and unique experiences of trauma and stress among officers.



## **Implications**

The study widens the dimensions of the knowledge supporting Central Florida law enforcement officers' encounters with EAPs after critical incidents. Furthermore, the study closes the gap between the officers' field experiences and existing academic literature to enhance the theoretical knowledge and propose practice applications for EAP efficiency improvement.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The integration of constructivist self-development theory in how the officers use the EAP after a critical incident helped explore the depths of the psychological processes of a law enforcement officer and the coping mechanisms they employ. This type of assessment supports the assumption that people perceive the world through the lens of their personal experiences and actively acquire new knowledge (Piaget, 1978). On the other hand, this theory also points to the elaborate issue that develops when these emotional experiences are placed within the unusual environment of law enforcement. Research findings indicate that self-development theory within constructivism should consider the workplace challenges specific to law enforcement, including an uncultured stigma linked to mental health, confidentiality concerns, and the dilemma of career implications associated with seeking counseling services (McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Saakvitne et al., 1998). The relationship between the identified factors and a law enforcement officer's readiness to utilize EAP services is vital because it affects the nature of their post-trauma processing and cognition. Additionally, the study has inspired a recommendation to expand constructivist self-development theory to explicitly include the influence of organizational elements and systemic factors in formulating individuals' coping strategies and resilience. Weaving these components together can promote insight into a complete image of law enforcement officers' recovery journey after critical incidents, highlighting how individual,

social, and organizational processes work together (Jetelina, Molsberry et al., 2020; Richards et al., 2021).

### **Empirical Implications**

From an empirical point of view, the study findings are helpful because they add to the existing body of knowledge on the role of EAP in the administration of justice by law enforcement officers, revealing the causes of why some law enforcement officers use the services, yet others do not. The study shows that an effective EAP is not often used by officers who have emotional problems, and this is due mainly to the confidentiality barriers to the helpers, the stigma for seeking help, and the lack of awareness or mistrust of the effectiveness of these programs (Jetelina, Molsberry, et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2023). In these interventions, comprehensive training programs targeted at EAP providers specifically for the context of law enforcement officers should be developed. Moreover, EAP counselors should have the cultural competence necessary to respond holistically to officers' needs and concerns instead of attempting to address them superficially. Also, policing agencies can significantly improve their mental wellness initiatives by having policies that promote creating and sustaining positive mental health mindsets and attitudes within the organizations through continuously working to break the stigma associated with mental health issues within that profession (Grupe, 2023; Soomro & Yanos, 2018). Additionally, research findings draw attention to the necessity of implementing empirical research to measure the long-term effects of using EAPs to support law enforcement officers' mental health, sense of fulfillment, and quality of life.

### **Practical Implications**

The target audience for policy recommendations emerging from this study includes policymakers, administrators, and other stakeholders who should be aware of the need for

systemic changes to heighten the efficiency and effectiveness of EAPs, especially for law enforcement officers. Lawmakers should think about legislative measures that ensure the confidentiality of the officers who appeal to them for help, addressing one of the main issues that do the same (Jetelina, Molsberry., 2020). A bill could be issued regulating EAP practices to deliver precisely to law enforcement officers' needs. Such a law would ensure that specific programs are geared toward the stress accompanying law enforcement officers' responsibilities. Additionally, the investments could be focused on supporting research and developing EAP interventions that effectively aid law enforcement officers.

Law enforcement agency executives are at the forefront of this culture shift by providing opportunities to increase the utilization of EAP services. Through actively promoting mental health awareness and integrating mental health services into the organizational culture, administrators can help deal with the officers' perception of judgment for seeking mental wellness help (Grupe, 2023). Mainly, it could entail constructing a peer support system where officers trained to offer essential mental health support would function as a feasible resource of help for their fellow officers. This creates an atmosphere of unity and mutual understanding (Secapramana et al., 2020). By implementing training, officers may be attuned to specific issues and the welfare of fellow law enforcement officers; therefore, the EAP services may become more meaningful and efficient (Moore et al., 2023).

On the other hand, coordinating the interaction between law enforcement agencies and mental health organizations would be another objective to ensure that EAPs would effectively satisfy the emerging demands of law enforcement, especially after critical incidents. Hence, raising the standards for law enforcement officers by developing EAPs implies teamwork and the participation of various high-level decision-makers. By removing the legislative, cultural, and

educational barriers to using EAP, it will be possible to develop a more supportive community of law enforcement officers.

## **Delimitations and Limitations**

### **Delimitations**

This study was bounded to active and retired law enforcement officers in Central Florida. The researcher delimited participants to those who utilized an EAP after a critical incident. This researcher intended to pick out a group that could furnish relevant data about EAP services in the given geographical location and professional context. Focusing on this area aided in analyzing the inherent culture of local law enforcement, EAP strategies, and local difficulties faced by officers in Central Florida. The study, however, was focused in depth on the individuals who encountered the program to capture the exact information on user experience, satisfaction levels, and the factors that hinder or facilitate program use. The main reason behind these restrictions was the necessity of producing informative findings concerning a particular situation that could potentially guide relevant law enforcement policies in similar contexts. Central Florida was selected due to its unique social and political atmosphere and environmental characteristics, which could influence the nature of critical encounters and the mental wellness support programs available for the officers. Besides, such an approach leads to the simplicity of participant sites and accelerates the data collection process.

### **Limitations**

The main drawback of the study is that its coverage was limited only to the Central Florida area. Although the setting helps to outline the study's objectives, it also creates an obstacle when generalizing the findings to other regions with diverse cultural, institutional, and demographic characteristics. While the analysis of law enforcement responses and the types and

availability of EAP services may vary among the Central Florida communities, the findings of this study may not be extended to other contexts. Another limitation is conducting interviews via computer instead of in person. This strategy was necessary due to practical limitations such as scheduling, geographical distance, and participant confidentiality, which can influence the amount of involvement and the kind of data collected. It is challenging to obtain officer participation in mental wellness research, and the dynamics of face-to-face communication compound the challenges when participants do not trust the person they are talking to. As a result, there is a gap in the researcher's ability to fully obtain the details and subtleties of participants' inputs.

Another limitation is that the analysis was concentrated on only officers who have sought EAP services after a critical incident, which introduces a selection bias; as a result, the study does not capture the perspectives of the officers who did not use an EAP. This disqualification also made it impossible for this study to examine some of the deterrents that stand in the way of officers who are not as proactive in seeking assistance from EAP, which may have negatively influenced the findings. The limits outlined in this study provide reasons to be extra careful about how the findings are generalized to real-world situations. While the researcher aimed to provide insight into law enforcement officers' experience utilizing EAP services, it should be noted that the information collected was gathered under specific constraints. Future investigations could be more explicit concerning the geographical scope and types of online and offline interviews. It can also involve experts from EAPs who have worked with law enforcement to better understand the factors shaping EAP utilization among law enforcement officers.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Extending the analysis of the EAP tool usage by law enforcement officer officers in the Central Florida area following their critical events, a solid foundation is made for the new dimensions of the study. The observations revealed an essential aspect of the support system that merits further exploration: supportive services and supportive programs are valuable as supplements or alternatives to standard EAP counseling. This result adds to the knowledge about law enforcement officers' preferences and needs. It considers the comprehensive research concerning the efficiency and structure of peer support networks within the law enforcement community. Initially, further investigations are required to explore the contrast in the effectiveness of peer support programs and traditional critical incident stress management services toward the mental health needs of law enforcement officer officers. Research should investigate the determinants of peer support, which describe the factors that make, or seem to make it, so effective. Notably, this may be accomplished by conducting quantitative studies to reveal the types of relationships and trust that develop within such peer networks and how these facilitate emotional and psychological recovery.

Furthermore, law enforcement officers deserve a comprehensive evaluation of available mental health services and support systems. The process should involve looking at peer support integration with other mental health strategies, such as CISM teams, and the effect of their combined interventions on officers' wellness. Conducting longitudinal research regarding the impact of various support mechanisms on the mental health, job satisfaction, and overall quality of life of officers would benefit policymakers and law enforcement management, meaning that studies should consider a broader range of participants from different regions and law enforcement agencies to understand the overall picture better. A broader geographical scope will

give a general perspective on the difficulties and needs of law enforcement officers in different states. This approach will also contribute to discovering how cultural, institutional, and demographic factors affect the outcomes and adoption of EAPs and peer support programs.

Future studies should involve the participants more comprehensively and holistically, allowing for a more profound analysis. The idea is to present focus group interviews as another factor not virtually executed on the computer. In-person, focus group interviews can add depth to a research project by uncovering the complex emotional and psychological dimensions of policing, and this way, the outcomes could be more robust and striking. Revealing the underlying reasons for the underuse of EAP services, as is found in the limitations of the present study, should be another significant research topic for the future. Realizing the underlying factors that can impede EAP service acquisition, like stigma, lack of knowledge, or lack of confidence regarding the performance of such services, can lead to more effective mental health support plans. Research must also concentrate on the way organizational culture and leadership affect the mental health care support attitude and the use of EAPs.

Concerning research design, prospective studies could entail mixed-methods techniques to help understand the complexity of law enforcement officers who experience mental health support systems. Numerical data will enable determining the scope of mental health cases, the number of users for support services, and the conditions that lead to the difference. Qualitative data may be added to trace officers' subjective experiences, perceptions, and requirements, leading to a comprehensive view of the issue. Not least, there is a chance for longitudinal studies involving officers' mental health outcomes to be traced over time. These studies provide an understanding of the effectiveness of the different support tools, for instance, peer support and EAPs in the long term, and their contribution to the officers' wellness, length of service, and

quality of life. Thus, research in this area must be extensive and inclusive and embrace a wide range of methodologies, which will further the goal of constructing a holistic and meticulous picture of law enforcement officers' mental health support environment. Peer support programs, broader coverage (both geographical and demographic), and employing a variety of research methods are essential elements that scholars can use to improve mental health interventions for law enforcement personnel.

### **Summary**

The study aims to understand the lived experiences of Central Florida law enforcement officers who utilized an EAP after a critical incident. By doing so, the researcher enriched the knowledge about mental wellness support within the profession of high-stress individuals. The researcher conducted enhanced interviews with 11 officers about their experiences and perceptions of EAP services. It helped identify one of the most complex elements in the officers' relationship with these services' availability, perception, and effectiveness in stress management after a critical incident. Critical issues are highlighted, namely the lack of trust in EAP counselors and their competence, a perceived bureaucratic approach to the officers' mental health, which the latter compares to just checking the box rather than attentiveness to officers' needs, and the difficulty officers have in asking for assistance because of stigma, confidentiality concerns, and concern about being declared unfit for duty. These barriers, as much as they may discourage officers from using EAP services, also shed the importance of a more relevant, culturally competent, and supportive approach to tackle the particular needs of law enforcement officers' mental health. A specific example of the study results is a response by Alpha, who had to go through the EAP process and compare it with a cookie-cutter approach that was not specific enough to address the aspects of his experiences. Similarly, Echo's reflection on being



asked standard, impersonal questions reveals a systemic issue within EAP services: a shortcoming of lack of actual involvement and understanding of the dynamic nature of trauma encountered by law enforcement officers. As a result, the data shows the vast disparity between the theoretical strength of EAP and the real experiences of officers disclosing their claims for support.

The study reveals two significant approaches to receiving EAP services for law enforcement officers after critical incidents. First, it shows that cultural competence and individual approach are essential areas on which improving EAP services should focus. A traditional “one-size-fits-all” model of EAP significantly hinders the program's performance, failing to meet the differing challenges and experiences of law enforcement officers. Therefore, EAP administrators should strive to deepen their understanding of law enforcement culture, train specifically in trauma-informed care associated with law enforcement officers, and tailor interventions to their needs to improve the EAP system. The study also highlights the widespread concerns and trust issues that hinder officers from seeking the assistance they need. Dealing with the challenges involves a comprehensive approach designed to achieve a higher level of confidentiality, create an environment that facilitates accessing professional care, and support peer programs. Such efforts to de-stigmatize mental health service delivery and protect confidentiality may be the cornerstone that would significantly place EAP as the much-desired alternative care available to officers. The main takeaways in this regard reveal the urgent call for EAP redesign to meet the unique requirements and cultural ensembles of law enforcement work and, consequently, to ensure that the officers are offered the most relevant and personalized support they need in the aftermath of the traumatic events.

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## APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

# LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

February 1, 2024

Lovetta Quinn-Henry  
Joseph Finck

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY23-24-1120 Understanding the Lived Experiences of Law Enforcement Officers Utilizing Employee Assistance Programs After Critical Incidents

Dear Lovetta Quinn-Henry, Joseph Finck,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

**For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your information sheet and final versions of your study documents can also be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.**

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP**  
*Administrative Chair*  
**Research Ethics Office**

## APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT FLYER



**Research Participants Needed**  
UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS UTILIZING EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS AFTER CRITICAL INCIDENTS

**Purpose of the Study?**  
To understand law enforcement officers' perspectives and experiences using an employee assistance program (EAP) after critical incidents.

**HOW TO PARTICIPATE?**

- Complete a demographic /qualification questionnaire (10 mins)
- Complete a 60-90 minute online audio/video (optional) interview to share their experiences using EAP after a critical incident.

**WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?**

- ✓ 19 years old or older
- ✓ Active or Retired
- ✓ Certified Law Enforcement Officer
- ✓ In Central Florida
- ✓ Used a employee assistance program (EAP) after a critical incident

If you would like to participate in the study click here  
<https://forms.gle/cDw5uT6EwqoZC8Y26> or scan the QR code and complete the questionnaire to determine your eligibility.

**Informed Consent**  
A consent document is provided as the first page of the questionnaire when you access the link.

**QUALIFIED PARTICIPANTS:**  
WILL RECEIVE A \$25 AMAZON GIFT CARD

IF YOU ANSWERED, YES TO EACH QUESTION, YOU MAY BE ELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH STUDY.



Principle Researcher: Lovetta Quinn-Henry, Liberty University Doctoral Candidate in the Helms School of Government at Liberty University is conducting this study.

Please contact, Lovetta Quinn-Henry at [REDACTED] for more information.



### **APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Greetings, how are you today?
2. Please briefly introduce yourself to me as if we just met.
3. Describe your experience using an employee assistance program after a critical incident.
4. Explain how you perceived the agency or coworkers after the critical incident.
5. What were your feelings and thoughts about citizens after the critical incident?
6. Explain how you constructed meaning and purpose job performance after the critical incident.
7. What are your beliefs about utilizing EAP services for law enforcement mental wellness.
8. Describe how EAP services affected your view of the critical incident.
9. How did sharing your critical incident with an EAP counselor make you feel?
10. What do you believe are barriers to accessing EAP services?
11. Explain what you believe are the benefits of using EAP services.
12. Describe how EAP services helped you restore control over your stress or cope with job-related challenges.
13. What other experiences or perceptions about EAP would you like to share with me that we have not already discussed?