

IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP DECISIONS ON POLICE OFFICER WELL-BEING:

A COVID-19 RESPONSE

by

Jason N. Spencer

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 qualitative dissertation research project is to determine the impact that law enforcement leaders, their leadership styles, and decision-making processes have on the well-being of police officers. This study sought to understand this impact by focusing on the perspectives of frontline police officers, detectives, and first-line supervisors from various law enforcement organizations in the Central Virginia Region and within the context of leadership decisions made in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Using the constructivist grounded theory approach to research design, 12 participants responded to an initial qualitative questionnaire, followed by a semi-structured interview to gain the rich, detailed data necessary to answer the research questions. Through the constant comparative analysis of the data, the key themes of *unprecedented*, *job to do*, *family impact*, *negative impact*, and *positive impact* emerged. These themes were synthesized to form an emerging theory explaining the research questions. This theory suggests that the processes law enforcement leaders use to make decisions impact police officer well-being, specifically in long-term, uncertain incidents like the global coronavirus pandemic. The study has implications for academic researchers and practitioners concerned with leadership in law enforcement organizations and police officer well-being. Future research recommendations are included in this study. Additionally, this research discusses recommendations for law enforcement leaders for future long-term, uncertain incidents like COVID-19.

Keywords: Leadership, COVID-19, police officer well-being, Servant Leadership, decision-making

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of those men and women who have paid the ultimate sacrifice in the line of duty, specifically my personal friends and shift partners Trooper-Pilot Berke M. M. Bates (EOW August 12, 2017) and Trooper Mark D. Barrett (EOW September 14, 2010) and their surviving families.

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Above all else, I want to acknowledge and thank my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for His Grace and Mercy that has sustained me through this process. I would not be where I am today without You. I pray that any accomplishments or accolades I may receive from these efforts would go towards furthering Your Kingdom.

Secondly, I want to acknowledge my wife, Leslie, and my daughter, Kaya. Leslie, your support and sacrifices during this dissertation were essential to me making it through these past few years of study and research. Kaya, I hope your experience of watching me “work on a paper” these many nights and weekends exemplifies perseverance and dedication to the goals you set for yourself.

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Knowing that you were in my corner as I navigated this research while balancing a full-time law enforcement career and a family helped me stay the course. Dr. Wilson, your insightful recommendations aided in the success of this dissertation.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	3
COPYRIGHT PAGE	4
DEDICATION	5
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	6
LIST OF TABLES	13
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	14
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	15
OVERVIEW	15
BACKGROUND	16
LAW ENFORCEMENT LEADERSHIP	16
POLICE OFFICER WELL-BEING	18
COVID-19 PANDEMIC	19
SITUATION TO SELF	20
PROBLEM STATEMENT	22
PURPOSE STATEMENT	23
SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY	24
RESEARCH QUESTIONS	25
DEFINITIONS	26
SUMMARY	26
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	28
OVERVIEW	28
GROUNDING THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW	29

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK.....	30
LAW ENFORCEMENT LEADERSHIP INFLUENCE.....	33
<i>Tradition Police Leadership</i>	35
<i>Servant Leadership</i>	37
POLICE OFFICER WELL-BEING	43
<i>Stress in Policing</i>	44
<i>Servant Leadership and Police Officer Well-being</i>	47
COVID-19 AND LAW ENFORCEMENT.....	50
<i>Law Enforcement Leadership Responses to COVID-19</i>	52
<i>COVID-19 and Law Enforcement Well-being.</i>	53
<i>COVID-19 and Grounded Theory</i>	56
GAPS IN LITERATURE	56
SUMMARY OF LITERATURE	57
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS	59
OVERVIEW	59
DESIGN	59
QUALITATIVE INQUIRY	60
CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY	62
SEMI-STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONAL INTERVIEW	64
RESEARCH QUESTIONS	66
SETTING.....	66
PARTICIPANTS	67
PROCEDURES.....	68

THE RESEARCHER'S ROLE..... 69

DATA COLLECTION 70

 QUALITATIVE OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONNAIRES..... 71

 SEMI-STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONAL INTERVIEWS 72

 REFLEXIVE MEMO JOURNALING 74

DATA ANALYSIS..... 74

TRUSTWORTHINESS..... 76

 CREDIBILITY 76

 DEPENDABILITY AND CONFIRMABILITY..... 76

 TRANSFERABILITY 77

 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS..... 78

SUMMARY 79

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS..... 81

OVERVIEW 81

PARTICIPANTS 81

 PARTICIPANT #1..... 84

 PARTICIPANT #2..... 84

 PARTICIPANT #3..... 84

 PARTICIPANT #4..... 85

 PARTICIPANT #5..... 85

 PARTICIPANT #6..... 85

 PARTICIPANT #7..... 86

	10
PARTICIPANT #8.....	86
PARTICIPANT #9.....	86
PARTICIPANT #10.....	87
PARTICIPANT #11.....	87
PARTICIPANT #12.....	87
RESULTS	88
THEME DEVELOPMENT	88
<i>Initial Coding</i>	89
<i>Focused Coding</i>	89
<i>Theoretical Coding</i>	90
THEMES	90
<i>Unprecedented</i>	91
<i>Job To Do</i>	97
<i>Family Impact</i>	99
<i>Negative Impact</i>	100
<i>Positive Impact</i>	110
<i>Leadership Characteristics</i>	114
RESEARCH QUESTION RESPONSES	119
<i>RQ1</i>	119
<i>RQ2</i>	119
<i>Theoretical Emergence</i>	120
SUMMARY	121
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION.....	122

OVERVIEW	122
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS	123
DISCUSSION	124
EMPIRICAL LITERATURE	125
<i>Job to Do</i>	126
<i>Negative Impact</i>	128
<i>Positive Impact</i>	128
THEORETICAL LITERATURE	129
<i>COVID-19</i>	129
<i>Police Officer Well-being</i>	130
<i>Law Enforcement Leadership</i>	131
IMPLICATIONS	132
THEORETICAL	132
EMPIRICAL	134
PRACTICAL	135
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	136
DELIMITATIONS AND LIMITATIONS	137
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	139
SUMMARY	140
REFERENCES.....	142
APPENDICES.....	159
APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER	159
APPENDIX B: QUALITATIVE OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS.....	160

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION	160
QUESTIONNAIRE QUESTIONS	162
APPENDIX C: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE.....	163
INTERVIEWS.....	163
PROBING QUESTIONS	163
APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT MEMORANDUM – POLICE	
AGENCY HEAD.....	165
APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT MEMORANDUM – PROFESSIONAL	
ORGANIZATION HEAD.....	166
APPENDIX F: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT SOCIAL MEDIA.....	167
APPENDIX F: IRB APPROVED CONSENT FORM	168

List of Tables

Table 1. Open Ended Questionnaire

Table 2. Semi Structured Interview Questions

Table 3. Participant Demographics

Table 4. Themes and Related Codes

List of Abbreviations

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)

Public Health Emergency (PHE)

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Leaders of law enforcement organizations in the United States of America and across the globe make decisions in response to the ever-evolving policing needs of society, their organizations, and their followers (Bowman, 2021; Jackson & Lee, 2019; Martin et al., 2017; Stoten, 2021). The challenges associated with leading law enforcement organizations have become increasingly complex in recent years. For example, high-profile police-to-citizen conflicts caught on video have increased the scrutiny of law enforcement practices and questioned the role of police in modern society (Jackson & Lee, 2019; Martin et al., 2017). Furthermore, the challenges of limited funding and difficulties in recruitment and retention of qualified police officers combine to make the decisions made by law enforcement leaders impactful to the police services delivered by their organizations.

While law enforcement leaders are dealing with the increasing challenges of modern policing impacting agencies generally, the well-being of police officers has become more visible to practitioners and garnered increased attention from academic researchers (Can et al., 2017; Lanza et al., 2018; Russell et al., 2018; Violanti et al., 2017). Police officers routinely experience traumatic scenes, physical danger, and high stress levels associated with performing their jobs (Can et al., 2017; Violanti et al., 2017). Additionally, the increased media scrutiny, unpredictable schedules, and agency bureaucracy often lead to increased burnout, absenteeism, and presenteeism among police officers (Lanza et al., 2018; Russell et al., 2018; Saunders et al., 2019). Furthermore, recent statistics show that police officer suicides are on the rise and currently outpace law enforcement homicides and other line of duty deaths (Saunders et al., 2019; Violanti et al., 2017). As a result, law enforcement leaders are increasingly concerned with

police officer well-being and its impact on operational effectiveness. However, minimal empirical research has been conducted on the effects of law enforcement leader decisions in response to emerging policing challenges on the overall well-being of officers.

The global coronavirus pandemic, commonly referred to as COVID-19, presented law enforcement leaders with unprecedented challenges for their organizations (Bowman & Owen, 2020; Stogner et al., 2020; White et al., 2022). With the emergence of COVID-19 in early 2020, police organizations worldwide were tasked with enforcing mask mandates, shelter-in-place orders, and other law enforcement functions rising from their respective governments' approaches to combating the pandemic. The routine functions of law enforcement agencies required police officers to have close personal contact with the public and other members of their organization, exposing them to increased opportunity for contracting the highly contagious and potentially deadly disease. Another concern was the increased risk of police officers bringing the COVID-19 virus home to their families. The unprecedented scale and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on society in general, and police officers specifically, presented law enforcement leaders with unique challenges and concerns for carrying out their agencies' missions while protecting the overall well-being of their followers. While the research on aspects of COVID-19s impact on society has increased, minimal research has been conducted on police leader response to the pandemic and the impact their decisions had on police officer well-being.

Background

Law Enforcement Leadership

Law enforcement agencies in the United States of America and across the globe are mission-driven public safety organizations. To achieve their missions, these organizations were traditionally established along a paramilitary, hierarchal, command-and-control rank structure

that is still relied upon today (Bowman, 2021; Jackson & Lee, 2019; Martin et al., 2017; Noor et al., 2018; Pearson-Goff & Herrington, 2014; Sousa & Dierendonck, 2017). In these hierarchal organizations, the leaders provide direction and guidance to the frontline workers through the chain-of-command. The leader or leaders at the top of the organizational structure set the vision and policies of the organization with minimal input from the frontline worker. While there are circumstances in which this organizational structure is advantageous, particularly in law enforcement circumstances involving immediate and often life-altering decisions, research has indicated that this type of organizational structure is fraught with inefficiencies and has the potential for disastrous outcomes.

Specifically, research in leadership studies suggests that followers demonstrate higher degrees of job satisfaction and commitment when they have increased levels of autonomy (Bowman, 2021; Martin et al., 2017; Pearson-Goff & Herrington, 2014; Santa Maria et al., 2021; Sarver & Miller 2014). Sarver and Miller (2014) provided an example of follower preferences on leadership characteristics when they explored police chief leadership styles using a multifactor leadership questionnaire to determine effective leader characteristics. The study's results suggest that leaders with transformational leadership characteristics, such as trustworthiness, openness to change, persuasiveness, and concern for others, are more successful in maximizing follower satisfaction and motivation than authoritative or passive leaders (Sarver and Miller, 2014).

Further academic studies show that followers perceive their leaders to be more successful when the followers have some degree of input into various decision-making processes (Andreescu & Vito, 2010; Brunetto et al., 2017; Russell et al., 2018; Sarver & Miller, 2014; Shim & Hoover, 2015; Vito & Vito, 2015; Wolfe et al., 2018). For example, Andreescu and Vito (2010) explored police officers' ideal leadership behaviors through a survey of law enforcement

managers. Among the leading characteristics of ideal leaders are tolerance and freedom, defined as allowing followers the opportunity for self-initiation, decision-making, and action (Andrescu & Vito, 2010). Russell et al.'s (2018) case study of Servant Leadership in law enforcement organizations found that followers presented positive thoughts towards their leaders and improved job engagement when allowed to be actively involved in the decision-making process.

Additionally, Wolfe et al.'s (2018) survey of 738 Border Patrol agents found organizational justice, or the fair treatment and transparency by supervisors, was a mitigating factor in stress experienced by officers facing increased levels of uncertainty. In response to these studies and their own preferences of leadership, many law enforcement leaders have begun to incorporate avenues for feedback from the frontline police staff. These leaders have also adopted people centered leadership styles that are open to input and the needs of their workers.

Police Officer Well-being

An increasing concern in the law enforcement community is focused on the well-being of police officers (Can et al., 2017; Lanza et al., 2018; Russell et al., 2018; Russell, 2014; Santa Maria et al., 2021; Violanti et al., 2017). While policing has been known as an inherently dangerous profession, research on police officer mental health, the impact of post-traumatic stress disorder on officers, and increased police officer suicides have enhanced the attention to the psychological effects of the job on police personnel. However, well-being encompasses a broader holistic understanding of positive feelings and achieving the full potential that can be objectively and subjectively measured by determinants such as physiological, psychological, emotional, career satisfaction and engagement, financial, family, and social wellness (Simmons & Baldwin, 2021). This broader definition of the well-being of police officers enables

researchers to obtain a more robust understanding of how police officers feel about the various elements and aspects of their profession.

Much of the available research on police officer well-being focuses on the elements of trauma experienced by police officers, such as physical assaults on themselves and their co-workers, exposure to traumatic scenes, and the constant, hypervigilant state that police officers must remain in to protect themselves effectively (Can et al., 2017; Lanza et al., 2018; Russell et al., 2018; Russell, 2014; Santa Maria et al., 2021; Violanti et al., 2017). In addition, researchers have increasingly focused on elements of bureaucracy within law enforcement organizations and the criminal justice system as a stressor for police officers and its impact on officer burnout and leaving law enforcement altogether (Santa Maria et al., 2021). Furthermore, researchers in police leadership studies have called for an increased investigation of the impact leaders in law enforcement organizations have on many of the determinants of police officer well-being (Sarver & Miller, 2014).

COVID-19 Pandemic

The global COVID-19 pandemic presented unique challenges for all sectors of industry, governments, and individuals worldwide that were beyond the expectations of health crises experienced prior to the emergence of this novel strain of the coronavirus (Boman & Owen, 2020; Campedelli et al., 2021; Frenkel et al., 2021; Gaitens et al., 2021; Jennings & Perez, 2020; Katzman et al., 2021; Lum et al., 2020; Stogner, et al., 2020). The far-reaching impacts of COVID-19 on society shuttered businesses, crippled supply chains, and shifted many of the established norms related to the meaning of work. The global health, economic, governmental, and mental health impacts challenge researchers to evaluate previously explored areas of study to

determine how conclusions drawn before the pandemic hold up to the unprecedented reality of COVID-19.

Law enforcement organizations worldwide were similarly impacted by the unanticipated and daunting realities of the COVID-19 pandemic (Boman & Owen, 2020; Campedelli et al., 2021; Frenkel et al., 2021; Jennings & Perez, 2020; Lum et al., 2020; Stogner et al., 2020). Law enforcement leaders faced myriad challenges related to policing during a global pandemic. One early concern for many law enforcement leaders was the availability of personal protective equipment, or PPE, for their frontline police officers (Camargo, 2022; Drew & Martin, 2020). The routine nature of police work requires officers to have close physical contact with others and, therefore, placed those officers at an increased risk of exposure by merely carrying out their jobs. Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, law enforcement leaders were challenged to weigh the absence of PPE for officers with the need to carry out the law enforcement and life safety missions of their organizations. These decisions directly impacted the immediate physical health of police officers and increased the potential for effects on their families and their mental well-being.

Situation to Self

As a leader in a law enforcement organization, this author is aware of the importance of leadership decision-making processes and their impact on the well-being of employees. Over the past 24 years, I have served within a statewide law enforcement organization in various follower and leader roles. Throughout my early career, I was exposed to the high stress and trauma associated with being an emergency law enforcement dispatcher, a uniformed police officer, and a motor vehicle crash reconstruction expert. As a result, the past 12 years of my career have been focused on some variation of leading employees with different levels of responsibilities and

specialties. These leadership roles include first-line supervision, developing and instructing leadership development courses, management of operations and administration, and command-level leadership.

During the initial days and weeks of the global COVID-19 pandemic, there was much confusion and many unknowns about the virus, including how law enforcement organizations should react. Admittedly, there was a lack of preparedness for the impact and longevity of the pandemic, delaying law enforcement organizations' responses. For example, personal protective equipment (PPE) was not widely available in the quantities needed by many police organizations to operate in an around-the-clock fashion. Likewise, law enforcement organizations were generally not equipped to allow their personnel, particularly their civilian or non-sworn law enforcement staff, to work-from-home. Without the necessary infrastructure, such as laptop computers, agency-issued telecommunications devices, policies, and procedures, these organizations were slow to shift to a work-from-home environment. As a leader in the Information Technology Division of my law enforcement organization tasked with assisting other divisions and units in response to their IT needs throughout the pandemic, I witnessed firsthand the negative impacts of indecision, slow, confusing, contradictory, and seemingly underexplored decision-making by organizational executive leaders on the stress and well-being of both sworn and non-sworn enforcement personnel. Simultaneously, I experienced the positive impact that calm, open, and communicative leadership had on the strain and well-being of personnel within my division. The experiences I observed within my law enforcement agency fueled my desire to explore the phenomenon of leadership impact on employee well-being, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Problem Statement

Law enforcement ranks among the top stressful occupations in the United States of America (Williams, 2021; Salary.com, 2021). Stress in policing comes from many occupational and organizational contexts that affect police officers' psychological wellness, physical health, family life, career progress, and job performance (Frenkel et al., 2021; Lockie et al., 2022; Russell et al., 2018; Russell, 2014; Stogner et al., 2020; Violanti et al., 2017). Furthermore, stress on police officers can negatively impact an organization through the quality and effectiveness of the law enforcement services provided. Therefore, understanding how stress affects police officers and the various techniques that mitigate law enforcement officers' stress is imperative to organizational leaders. Police officer well-being has been an expanding subject of academic study and practical application for law enforcement organizations. However, an area often overlooked in the academic literature is the impact of law enforcement leader decisions and how the methods used to reach those decisions affect police officer stress and well-being.

In early 2020, governments across the globe, including the federal, state, and local governments of the United States of America, enacted emergency public health orders in response to the novel coronavirus pandemic, also known as COVID-19 (WHO, 2020; Frenkel et al., 2021; Stogner et al., 2020). The ensuing social distancing requirements, stay-at-home orders, mask mandates, and the shuttering of businesses and economies across the globe affected all industries and occupations (Frenkel et al., 2021; Stogner et al., 2020). For law enforcement leaders across the United States of America, the coronavirus pandemic presented organizational challenges many never envisioned. Moreover, the pandemic's magnitude, scale, and long-term impact are poised to have an even lengthier influence on the practices of police agencies in the decades to come. Stogner et al. (2020) compare the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on

police agencies to the 1980s HIV epidemic and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in their significance in altering police practices.

Undoubtedly, the decisions made by law enforcement leaders in response to the coronavirus pandemic and the methodologies used for coming to those decisions impacted police officer well-being. However, there is a scarcity of academic research on this topic. Much of the coronavirus pandemic research from the United States of America focuses on the impact of the pandemic on crime rates and trends (Boman & Owen, 2020; Campedelli et al., 2021; Jennings & Perez, 2020; Maskály et al., 2021; McCarthy et al., 2021; Scott & Gross, 2021; Stern, 2021). The minimal research on the coronavirus pandemic and police officer well-being comes from the United Kingdom or the European Union and focuses on the pandemic as the source of stress versus focusing on the impact of leader decisions (Edwards & Kotera, 2021; Fleming & Brown, 2022; Frenkel et al., 2021). Therefore, this study expands the academic knowledge of police officer well-being, leadership decision-making, and the nexus between these two critical areas.

Purpose Statement

This constructivist grounded theory study sought to understand the impact of leadership decisions on the well-being of police officers across various law enforcement organizations in Central Virginia Region of the United States of America during the COVID-19 pandemic. For the purpose of the research, leadership decisions will be generally defined as the policy and procedure choices made by executive and command level police leaders that impact the daily operations of the police organizations, as well as the processes these leaders use to determine and implement these choices. Additionally, for the purpose of the research, police officer well-being will be generally defined as the police officer's overall state of positive feelings and fulfillment of potential that can be measured subjectively and objectively using a salutogenic approach

(Simons & Baldwin, 2021). These subjective and objective measures include physiological, psychological, financial, occupational, and familial well-being. The Servant Leadership theory guided this study as it compares to Traditional or autocratic leadership approaches utilized within many law enforcement organizations (Jackson & Lee, 2019; Martin et al., 2017; Russell et al., 2018; Sousa & Dierendonck, 2017). Servant Leadership theory characteristics were explored from a grounded theory approach and within the context of the unprecedented global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to understand the perceptions of police officers regarding how the use of these modern leadership characteristics versus traditional leadership characteristics impacted their well-being.

Significance of the Study

The research associated with this study has significance to more than one genre of academic research. From a law enforcement leadership perspective, this study provides police leaders and policymakers with valuable information regarding the importance of leader decision-making during critical, long-term events. Most critical incident response training and academic studies for law enforcement focus on short-term incidents with known objectives to conclude the incident and move on to the next assignment. With the COVID-19 pandemic, law enforcement leaders were presented with an unprecedented critical incident. There was no playbook or previous equivalent incident to use as a guide for responding to the various issues associated with this more than three-year global pandemic. Therefore, this study sought to further the knowledge base on law enforcement leadership response to critical incidents.

Similarly, the research associated with this study has significance to police officer well-being research. Police officer well-being research has grown in academic, and practitioner focus over several decades. However, most of the available research focuses on the stress of normal

police activities or the residual impact of trauma on police officers. The research within this study broadens the knowledge of leadership decisions and decision-making as a mitigating or aggravating factor in police officer well-being.

Research Questions

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on law enforcement organizations and policing in the United States of America cannot be understated and is deserving of continued academic research (Boman & Owen, 2020; Campedelli et al., 2021; Frenkel et al., 2021; Jennings & Perez, 2020; Scott & Gross, 2021; Stogner et al., 2020; Teti et al., 2020). Much of the current research on the COVID-19 pandemic and policing centers on the effect of the pandemic on crime rates and policing-related trends (Boman & Owen, 2020; Campedelli et al., 2021; Jennings & Perez, 2020; Scott & Gross, 2021; Stern, 2021). However, of equal importance, but currently, less focus from the academic community is the impact of COVID-19 on police officer well-being (Frenkel et al., 2021; Stogner et al., 2020). Notably absent in the academic research is the impact of police leaders' decision-making in response to the COVID-19 pandemic on officer well-being.

The current dissertation research project explored the COVID-19 pandemic, law enforcement leadership style and decision-making, and the impact on police officer well-being. Within this framework, the researcher proposed to investigate the following research questions:

1. How did police officers perceive the impact of law enforcement leaders' decision-making on their overall well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How did police officers perceive the impact of law enforcement leaders' leadership style on their overall well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Definitions

Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic – The period of the public health emergency (PHE) declaration in response to the novel global coronavirus disease 2019. This period encompasses the World Health Organization’s PHE declaration on March 11, 2020 through the end of the PHE declaration on May 5, 2023 (WHO, 2020; WHO, 2023).

Law Enforcement Leader (Leadership) – The individual or group of individuals with decision-making authority over a law enforcement agency. Often referred to as the chief, sheriff, director, superintendent, and executive-level directors.

Leadership Decisions – The policy and procedure choices made by law enforcement leaders that impact the daily operations of their police organizations. This includes the processes these leaders use to determine and implement these choices.

Police Officer – Those individuals entrusted with arrest and enforcement powers of their respective jurisdictional governments’ laws, regulations, and ordinances. Police officers could include federal, state, and local personnel of public government bodies.

Well-being (Wellbeing) – Well-being is a state of positive feelings and meeting full potential in the world. It can be measured subjectively and objectively using a salutogenic approach (Simmons & Baldwin, 2021).

Summary

Law enforcement leaders in modern police agencies have myriad challenges that impact their organizations’ effectiveness. These organizational leaders must balance their organizations’ missions, the needs of their personnel, the whims of political leaders, the availability of resources, and their responsibility to the citizens of their communities. The varying needs of these stakeholders are often in conflict and require leaders to make decisions that impact how,

where, and when police officers do their jobs. Law enforcement leaders must, therefore, be conscious of the impact of decision-making on the police officers under their command.

This study explored the impact of law enforcement leadership decisions on police officer well-being from the perspective of police officers during the global COVID-19 pandemic. The effect of the global COVID-19 pandemic has been unprecedented in all aspects of life, including within the law enforcement community. With minimal guiding recommendations for responding to an incident with the scale, magnitude, and longevity experienced with COVID-19, understanding decision-making's impact on police officer well-being is vital to law enforcement organizations, police officers, communities, and academia.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter describes the relevant literature on law enforcement leadership theory, police officer well-being, and the COVID-19 pandemic that informed the research questions and provided the framework for this study. Specifically, the review of the literature on leadership theory is a contrast of the traditional law enforcement leadership with the characteristics of the Servant Leadership theory, which is increasing in popularity among police researchers and practitioners. These contrasting theoretical approaches to leadership and decision-making within law enforcement organizations is reviewed in their relationship to police officer well-being. Furthermore, the chapter describes the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on society, law enforcement, and academic knowledge. However, before engaging in a review of the literature that surrounds the study topic, this chapter begins with a brief understanding of the grounded theory approach to qualitative research (see Chapter 3 – Research Methods for complete methodological approach) that was utilized for this study and the role of the literature review within grounded theory research.

The review of the relevant literature is organized into three sections with various subsections. The first section is the theoretical conception of law enforcement leadership theory. This section examines the literature associated with the traditional law enforcement leadership approach and its contrast with modern theories of law enforcement leadership, particularly the theory of Servant Leadership. The second section of this chapter examines the growing literature on police officer well-being. This section examines multiple aspects of well-being, including physical, psychological, emotional, career satisfaction and engagement, financial, family,

spiritual, and social wellness. Finally, the third section of this chapter explores the limited but growing literature on the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on society and law enforcement.

Grounded Theory and Literature Review

The research within this study used a grounded theory approach, which Glaser and Strauss first formulated in 1967. Under this theoretical approach, the authors suggest that qualitative researchers can discover theory from a systematic analysis of the data obtained by the research (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). In their theoretical approach, Glaser and Strauss (2017) proposed using comparative analysis as a strategic method for discovering a theory from the data sets gathered through research. This approach is often used when there is little available knowledge on a given research topic, or there is a significant change in the understanding of a given phenomenon (Charmaz, 2017; Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Thurlow, 2020; Tie et al., 2019).

Since Glaser and Strauss' first writings on the topic, grounded theorists have argued for and against the inclusion of a review of extant literature and its proper placement within the research process (Charmaz, 2017; Dunne, 2011; El Hussein et al., 2017; Giles et al., 2013; Thurlow, 2020; Tie et al., 2019). Early on, many grounded theorists argue that the discovery of new theories from the research data was harmed by a literature review conducted before gathering and analyzing the data. However, as more researchers, particularly Ph.D. students, have adopted the grounded theory approach for their research projects, reviewing available literature within an area of interest has become widely accepted. Researchers must recognize the influence of the literature review on the data gathering and analysis process to control the external influences on the discovery of new theory. Additionally, researchers must recognize that the grounded theory approach is an iterative research approach, and revisions of the literature review throughout the entire research process might be necessary.

The research conducted for this qualitative grounded theory study recognizes the importance of the literature review as a guide to a complete understanding of the data and its potential practical use. The conceptual framework for this study is heavily influenced by leadership and well-being theories, particularly within the context of law enforcement organizations. Many aspects of the research have a basis within preexisting literature and previous studies, which have shaped the study into the concept under review. However, the unprecedented impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic provides a backdrop that is ripe for further exploration and new discoveries that lend credence to the use of the grounded theory approach. With this information in mind, the literature review provided value for early inclusion in the research process as it narrowed the scope of the research but was consciously set aside during the data gathering and analysis process, which allowed the data to drive the discovery of the new theory or theories.

Conceptual Framework

The law enforcement profession within the United States of America has long been suitable for academic research and the continuing exploration of human interactions from both a qualitative and quantitative aspect. The role police officers fulfill within society has significant implications for several research fields and serves as a hotbed of new ideas, approaches, and better practices (Martin et al., 2017). For example, the past decade of academic study in criminal justice research has explored the impact of new and emerging technologies, police culture, procedural justice, and inequality (Martin et al., 2017; Nix & Wolfe, 2017; Noor et al., 2018; Pyle & Cangemi, 2019; Stoten, 2021). In addition, organizational leadership theorists have spent considerable time and attention on various aspects of policing and how leaders within law enforcement organizations influence follower behavior, actions, motivation, and engagement

(Andreescu & Vito, 2010; Brunetto et al., 2017; Ma et al., 2015; Simmons-Beauchamp & Sharpe, 2022). Another area of increased interest in researching law enforcement over the past decade is police officer well-being. While the interest in police officer well-being has expanded into various topics such as post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide, and resilience, there are critical gaps in the base of knowledge that beg for exploration (Martin et al., 2017; Noor et al., 2018; Pyle & Cangemi, 2019; Violanti et al., 2017).

Researchers, however, have paid minimal academic focus on the impact of leadership approaches and leader decision-making processes on the well-being of police officers within law enforcement organizations. The dearth of research in this critical area serves as the foundation for the research questions of this dissertation project. The global coronavirus pandemic, often referred to as COVID-19, provided a unique and nearly unprecedented context to explore the impact of law enforcement leadership on police officer well-being (Boman & Owen, 2020; Frenkel et al., 2021; Gaitens et al., 2021; Jennings & Perez, 2020; Lum et al., 2020; Stogner et al., 2020). To explore and expand the knowledge base in this area, the author of this dissertation sought to understand better how law enforcement leaders' decisions in response to COVID-19 impacted the well-being of police officers.

An understanding of the available literature and previous academic work is required to provide a framework for exploring the critical topic proposed by the researcher. First, this literature review investigated the theoretical underpinnings of the proposed research by reviewing relevant literature on law enforcement leadership with particular attention to leadership styles and decision-making processes of law enforcement leaders. Second, the relevant literature on the concepts associated with police officer well-being, its importance to law enforcement, and the potential impacts of leader decision-making on officer well-being was

reviewed. Next, this review explored relevant literature from the available research on the impact and implications of COVID-19 on law enforcement organizations.

To gather the relevant literature for review on the research questions, most of the academic research was retrieved through the Liberty University Jerry Falwell Library system. This author used the keyword search and filtering functionality of the Liberty University Jerry Falwell Library system to limit the returned information to peer-reviewed journal articles from the past five years. During the compilation of the academic research, when an article met the scope of the research, the references section was carefully reviewed to gather additional resources for the literature review. Furthermore, a review of the articles citing the original article meeting the search criteria was conducted to expand relevant literature for this review. As a guide to the research design, relevant academic textbooks from the author's coursework were utilized. Lastly, gray literature was gathered for this literature review by utilizing Google's keyword search capabilities. The search engine's advanced search tool options allowed filtering results limited to the past five years.

While the literature review focused principally on academic research for the basis of knowledge, it would be incomplete without exploring available gray literature (Glesne, 2016; Xiao & Watson, 2019). Gray literature comprises that knowledge base presented by reputable professional organizations or governmental entities and is influenced by academic research or evidence-based study. Many law enforcement leaders rely on these professional or governmental organizations to synthesize the many complex variables in academic research into best practices or recommendations for policing. Of the literature considered in this review, gray literature comprised less than 10 percent of the basis for this project.

Law Enforcement Leadership Influence

The mission of police organizations is to provide public safety and law enforcement services for their respective communities. In order to achieve their mission, law enforcement agencies have historically been organized in a paramilitary command-and-control hierarchal structure (Andreescu & Vito, 2010; Can et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2017; Noor et al., 2018; Pearson-Goff & Herington, 2013; Russell et al., 2018; Thomas & Cangemi, 2021). Leadership and management personnel within law enforcement organizations are routinely predicated on a military rank structure where the manager utilizes positional authority over subordinate followers. In these top-down hierarchal leadership structures, directives, tasks, schedules, and assignments are designated by the organization's leaders and supervisors with minimal input from the frontline workers performing the tasks or carrying out the assignments. Requests for resources and situational awareness information flow upwards and are filtered through the organizational chain-of-command. This filtering of information upwards to decision-makers can potentially cause delay in necessary resources and misunderstanding of the needs. Depending on the size and complexity of the law enforcement organization, the person who has singular control of the department, also known as an agency head, may be a sheriff, police chief, or superintendent (Andreescu & Vito, 2010; Can et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2017; Noor et al., 2018; Pearson-Goff & Herington, 2013; Russell et al., 2018).

Agency heads routinely empanel executive-level leadership structures that may consist of one or multiple persons depending on the organization's structure and mission (Andreescu & Vito, 2010; Can et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2017; Noor et al., 2018; Pearson-Goff & Herington, 2013; Russell et al., 2018). The agency head and executive leaders in these organizations routinely set the organization's direction, tone, and vision and make decisions that impact every

member of the agency (Andreescu & Vito, 2010; Simmons-Beauchamp & Sharpe, 2022; Sunday, 2016). In addition to executive-level leadership, most organizations have at least a middle management, sometimes called command level leadership. These middle managers apply the agency head and executive leader's decisions to the personnel under their command. Finally, first-line supervisors manage the daily tasks and assignments of police officers and other law enforcement agency personnel.

The traditional approach to leading a law enforcement organization has positive and negative impacts (Andreescu & Vito, 2010). For example, Andreescu & Vito's (2010) exploration on the opinions of police managers regarding ideal leadership behavior found that the characteristics of the command-and-control leadership style, such as the leader's ability to take control of a situation, are valued in large-scale emergency response circumstances. However, this style of leadership can cause a delay in critical information reaching decision makers and increases the opportunity for vital information to be filtered from the original message. Additionally, the traditional style of police leadership has been shown through previously mentioned research studies to increase police officer stress and job-related burnout (Brunetto et al., 2017; Can et al., 2017; Hurtado et al., 2018; Lanza et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2017; Russell et al., 2018; Russell, 2014; Santa Maria et al., 2021; Saunders et al., 2019; Violanti et al., 2017).

Over the past two decades, law enforcement leaders have increasingly explored corporate organizational leadership examples to improve their leadership skills and the response of their followers (Martin et al., 2017; Noor et al., 2018; Russell et al., 2018; Sousa & Dierendonck, 2017). While the utility of command-and-control leadership styles remains necessary in certain emergency and life-safety scenarios, police officers, law enforcement leaders, and others within

criminal justice organizations are finding these new variations on leadership styles effective. For example, Noor et al. (2018) explored the influence of various leadership styles on police officer disciplinary issues. The authors' study suggests that the traditional or autocratic leadership style stifles commitment, creativity, and innovation (Noor et al., 2018). In contrast, other leadership styles, such as transformational or transactional leadership, can improve relationships between leaders and followers and followers' motivation in police agencies.

Furthermore, an increasing number of law enforcement agencies prefer the openness of information exchange in these alternative styles to traditional leadership (Can et al., 2017; Pyle & Cangemi, 2019). Can et al. (2017) surveyed 152 anonymous police officers in the United States to explore the possible associations between police officer well-being and transformational leadership characteristics. The results of their study suggest that clear, open communication was highly associated with lower levels of police officer stress and improved overall well-being (Can et al., 2017). Similarly, Pyle and Cangemi's (2019) review of transformational leadership and organizational change found that followers deemed leaders with ineffective and closed communication as lacking competence. These studies suggest a potential link between traditional hierarchal law enforcement leadership characteristics and the negative impact on police officer well-being, which is essential for the current research project.

Tradition Police Leadership

Modern law enforcement organizations within the United States of America and across many parts of the world are organized along a paramilitary, command-and-control model of leadership (Andreescu & Vito, 2010; Can et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2017; Noor et al., 2018; Pearson-Goff & Herington, 2013; Russell et al., 2018; Thomas & Cangemi, 2021; Valenti, 2019; Vito et al., 2014; Wheatcroft, 2015). These types of leadership structures are often referred to as

traditional police leadership structures. Within these organizations, the direction, decision-making, and mission objectives are disseminated from the top of the organization's hierarchal structure to the lower-level frontline employees who carry out their tasks. Information, intelligence, and resource requests are often generated from the frontline police officer upward through the chain-of-command. Leadership in these types of organizations is routinely determined by a rank structure similar to that of military forces.

The traditional leadership approach to law enforcement has utility in certain circumstances, particularly in large-scale critical incidents with clear and unambiguous objectives (Davis & Bailey, 2018; Martin et al., 2017). Additionally, the traditional leadership approach is helpful in high task-oriented situations where clear role and responsibility demarcation is necessary. Davis and Bailey's (2018) research suggest that many law enforcement officers and supervisors recognize and appreciate the functionality of the traditional leadership hierarchy where authority and responsibility are designated by rank. Frontline police officers particularly favor this approach to decision-making in situations such as large crowd control or protest events where decision-making must be clearly positioned. In these situations, individual police actions taken by officers without a more extensive understanding of the implications of those actions could result in the instigation of a crowd and increase the likelihood of additional violence or property damage. Therefore, the traditional command-and-control leadership style is relied upon during these circumstances.

However, the traditional law enforcement leadership style has significant challenges and adverse impacts on other aspects of policing. One of the main criticisms of the traditional hierarchal police leadership style is that leadership ability and rank attainment are often confused (Davis & Bailey, 2018; Martin et al., 2017; Wolfe & Nix, 2017; Wolfe et al., 2016; Wolfe et al.,

2018). According to Martin et al. (2017), many leading law enforcement leadership training curriculums suggest that a leader's authority is a right of their rank. According to the researchers, the problem with this approach is that an individual's ability to lead others and their attainment of higher supervisory or managerial positions are not the same. In addition, relying on followership compliance based solely on rank results in decreased engagement, motivation, and productivity of police officers (Davis & Bailey, 2018; Martin et al., 2017; Russell, 2014; Russell et al., 2014; Santa Maria et al., 2021). Decreased engagement, motivation, and productivity amongst police officers can adversely impact the organization's ability to achieve its public safety mission.

Furthermore, studies associated with the traditional police leadership approach suggest that this leadership style decreases employee job satisfaction, increases stress, and burnout amongst law enforcement officers (Bilge et al., 2021; Chitra & Karunanidhi, 2018; Coetzer et al., 2017; Ma et al., 2015; Martin et al., 2017; Noor et al., 2018; Russell et al., 2018; Sunday, 2016; Yasir & Mohammed, 2016). A major concern expressed by these studies on traditional police leadership is that the decisions made by organizational leaders are not fully explained. The lack of complete understanding of leader decisions presents a perception amongst subordinates that leaders do not fully understand the needs of frontline workers (Coetzer et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2017). These perceptions by subordinate officers lead to increased stress and decreased job satisfaction, according to Chitra and Karunanidhi's (2018) research on occupational stress, resilience, and job satisfaction. Low police officer job satisfaction and increased occupational stress, unaddressed, can lead to negative organizational impacts such as absenteeism, burnout, and job abandonment.

Servant Leadership

Over the past few decades, law enforcement leaders have explored alternatives to the traditional police leadership style to improve morale and increase motivation, productivity, and officer engagement (Martin et al., 2017). As law enforcement leaders have continued to explore and implement alternatives to the traditional police leadership style, a style of interest for many law enforcement leaders and organizations is the Servant Leadership style (Bilge et al., 2021; Jackson & Lee, 2019; Martin et al., 2017; Russell, 2019; Russell et al., 2018; Vito et al., 2011). Servant Leadership theory is a follower-oriented leadership style that posits when leaders focus on the needs and aspirations of their employees, those employees become increasingly engaged in the organization and seek to provide customers with better service. With this leadership perspective, the servant leader's focus is first on serving, followed by the desire to lead as a service to others.

Based on the 1970s writings of Robert Greenleaf, the servant as a leader places the needs of others before their own. Servant leaders first seek to serve others, and this desire to serve transitions naturally to leading as a form of service. The idea of service to something greater than oneself has been a long-standing tradition within law enforcement organizations, even though it is not always directly focused on subordinate followers within the agency. The role of police in society has often been equated as a public servant and servant to the law. Within this mindset, many law enforcement leaders find the characteristics of Servant Leadership easy to comprehend.

Expanding Greenleaf's concept of the servant as leader, additional research further developed the common characteristics displayed by servant leaders (Jackson & Lee, 2019; Martin et al., 2017; Russell et al., 2018; Sousa & Dierendonck, 2017). According to the researchers, these characteristics are largely based on the ethical and moral actions of the leader.

The research identified ten unique tenets or characteristics displayed by servant leaders. These characteristics of Servant Leadership include effective listening, empathizing with others, having a healing approach, an awareness of others' needs, effectively persuading followers, effectively conceptualizing and communicating their vision, use of foresight, being a steward of leadership trust, commitment to the growth and development of others, and a desire to build community within the organization and its stakeholders.

Characteristics of Servant Leadership. An exploration of the ten characteristics of Servant Leadership is critical to understanding the framework of the research questions and how Servant Leadership theory might influence the results of this study. Effective listening is a vital characteristic employed by leaders who subscribe to the Servant Leadership style (Jit et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2017; Russell et al., 2018). These leaders understand that taking the time to listen to and show appreciation for employee perspectives and views is critical to determining the needs, aspirations, and motivations of followers. The characteristic of effective listening is displayed by active and participatory listening to new ideas, viewpoints, and innovations. Additionally, servant leaders recognize, through effective listening, that they may not have all of the answers to every situation despite years of experience, title, or rank. Lastly, servant leaders listen internally to themselves when making decisions and plans, acknowledging their own moral compass as a guide.

Another vital characteristic of Servant Leadership is the tenet of empathy (Coetzer et al., 2017; Jit et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2017). Empathetic leaders are those who can see the follower's perspective, comprehend follower's needs, and display respect for them as an individual (Jit et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2017). The ability to empathize with others strengthens the relational bond between the leader and followers (Martin et al., 2017). The third tenet of

Servant Leadership is healing, sometimes referred to as forgiving, and is closely tied to the previous two characteristics (Jit et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2017; Russell et al., 2018). The characteristic of healing is the leader offering meaningful guidance that moves the follower towards an effective positive resolution of issues and requires the servant leader to use their listening and empathy characteristics for success.

Servant leaders also possess the characteristic of awareness (Jit et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2017). The critical characteristic of awareness includes the leader's ability to understand and adhere to their personal ethical values while also displaying concern for the values of individuals, the organization, and other vital stakeholders (Coetzer et al., 2017; Jit et al., 2017). Possessing a persuasive influence is the next characteristic of leaders who practice Servant Leadership (Jackson & Lee, 2019; Sousa & Dierendonck, 2017). The tenet of persuasion enables the servant leader to lead followers without dependence upon positional authority (Jackson & Lee, 2019; Martin et al., 2017). Through persuasion, the leader practicing Servant Leadership characteristics strives to generate consensus in decision-making.

The next characteristic of leaders utilizing Servant Leadership display is their ability to conceptualize a vision for the organization (Coetzer et al., 2017; Jackson & Lee, 2019). Servant leaders have and communicate big dreams for their agencies (Jackson & Lee, 2019). Additionally, these leaders do not get overly constrained by routine short-term issues and distractions, choosing instead to focus on the long-term needs of the organization. Similarly, servant leaders exhibit foresight, the seventh tenet of Servant Leadership, when addressing situations that arise (Coetzer et al., 2017; Jackson & Lee, 2019; Jit et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2017). Leaders in these instances can use past experiences, balanced with the present realities, to determine likely future outcomes of their decisions on a given situation.

The eighth tenet of Servant Leadership is commonly referred to as stewardship (Coetzer et al., 2017; Jackson & Lee, 2019; Sousa & Dierendonck, 2017). Leaders demonstrating this characteristic of Servant Leadership take ownership of the responsibilities of their positions and display a commitment to the needs of their followers (Jackson & Lee, 2019). Demonstrating stewardship aids in building trust between the leader and follower. Additionally, servant leaders using this characteristic increase the followers' confidence that the leader will care for and treat them in a moral and proper way (Jackson & Lee, 2019; Jit et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2017). The ninth characteristic of Servant Leadership states that servant leaders demonstrate a commitment to the personal and professional growth of their followers (Coetzer et al., 2017; Jackson & Lee, 2019; Jit et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2017). Servant leaders recognize the intrinsic value of followers and understand that these followers are more than employees or resources used for productivity (Coetzer et al., 2017; Jackson & Lee, 2017; Martin et al., 2017). Additionally, servant leaders provide opportunities for followers to grow by involving them in the decision-making process and providing opportunities for feedback. Lastly, servant leaders work to build community both within an organization and with external stakeholders (Coetzer et al., 2017; Jackson & Lee, 2019; Jit et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2017). Within law enforcement organizations, this tenet most closely aligns with community-based policing activities and the focus building better relationships between law enforcement and the communities they serve (Jackson & Lee, 2019; Martin et al., 2017; Russell, 2019; Russell et al., 2018).

Servant Leadership and Law Enforcement. Servant Leadership challenges the traditional law enforcement leadership by focusing on moral behavior and displaying concern for followers, empowering their ability to achieve success. Servant leaders create an environment that enables follower involvement in decision-making processes, fosters teamwork, and provides

growth opportunities within the organization. These characteristics of Servant Leadership position the leader with the unique opportunity to lead followers while simultaneously empowering them to better themselves and the organization.

Servant Leadership characteristics also strongly affect police officer well-being (Jackson & Lee, 2019; Martin et al., 2017; Russell et al., 2018; Sousa & Dierndonck, 2017). The Servant Leadership approach adopts a prioritization of the needs of others over the concern for oneself, which suggests the leadership style has value for law enforcement leaders within this context (Bowman, 2021; Jackson & Lee, 2019; Martin et al., 2017; Russell et al., 2018; Sousa & Dierndonck, 2017). For example, Bowman's (2021) review of Servant Leadership suggests the psychological well-being of employees was enhanced by the leader's engagement with followers from an emotional, ethical, and social approach. Specifically, the Servant Leadership characteristics of effective listening, empathy, emotional healing, and awareness of others serve as the catalyst for enhancing the employee's well-being (Bowman, 2021). Furthermore, servant leaders manifest atmospheres in the organization where employees feel respected, are treated fairly, and their voices are heard.

Russell et al.'s (2018) case study of a law enforcement organization's adoption of Servant Leadership and the positive perceptions of improved well-being by frontline police officers suggests a positive association between the leadership style and improved police officer well-being. The researchers found strong support for the mitigating influence of Servant Leadership on police officer stress. Though the sample size of this case study has its limitations on generalizability, the research is vital to the concept of Servant Leadership impacting police officer occupational stress and trauma. The study is relevant to the current research project by providing foundational knowledge on leadership strategies impacting police officer well-being.

Jackson & Lee's (2019) research on Servant Leadership in times of crisis provides further support for the impact of the leadership theory and the current research project. The writers surveyed and analyzed the responses of three police chiefs from three of the largest cities in the Commonwealth of Virginia (Jackson & Lee, 2019). The respondents were provided with a synopsis of the ten characteristics of Servant Leadership, then asked to describe how those characteristics influence their decision-making during times of crisis. The participants identified areas of influence of the Servant Leadership characteristics that were impactful to their decision-making and perceived as having a positive influence on the well-being of their personnel and communities. Thus, in times of crisis, many law enforcement leaders find value in the characteristics of Servant Leadership.

Police Officer Well-being

The concept of police officer well-being is of increased interest among academic researchers and practitioners in law enforcement organizations (Demou et al., 2020; Lanza et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2017; Russell, 2019; Russell et al., 2018; Taylor, 2022). The increased interest in police officer well-being stems from various rationale and perspectives; however, the general hypothesis argues that communities are better protected by law enforcement officers who are physically, mentally, emotionally, and organizationally well (Brunetto et al., 2017; Hurtado et al., 2018; Lanza et al., 2018; Lockie et al., 2022; Santa Maria et al., 2021; Saunders et al., 2019; Violanti et al., 2017). Additionally, recent high-profile police-to-citizen contacts caught on video and scrutinized in the media by activist groups, community leaders, and the general public have impacted police departments resulting in increased turnover, occupational stress, and a questioning of the role of policing in society (Lanza et al., 2018; Noor et al., 2018; Santa Maria et al., 2021; Saunders et al., 2019).

While a consensus definition of well-being is elusive, at a conceptual level, police officer well-being encompasses a holistic view of an individual's overall wellness (Brunetto et al., 2017; Hurtado et al., 2018; Lanza et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2017; Russell et al., 2018; Santa Maria et al., 2021; Saunders et al., 2019; Violanti et al., 2017). Holistically, police officer well-being includes physiological, psychological, sociological, economic, occupational, and familial wellness. However, many researchers focus on the psychological concept of wellness when investigating police officer well-being (Hurtado et al., 2018; Lanza et al., 2018; Saunders et al., 2019; Violanti et al., 2017). Due to the interdependencies of well-being, the current research proposal focuses on the holistic understanding of police officer well-being.

Stress in Policing

Often researched within the context of police officer well-being, stress is a significant variable impacting law enforcement organizations (Bishopp et al., 2016; Brunetto et al., 2017; Hurtado et al., 2018; Lanza et al., 2018; Lockie et al., 2022; Mumford, 2015; Santa Maria et al., 2021; Saunders et al., 2019; Violanti et al., 2017). Researchers routinely categorize sources of police officer stressors into occupational, organizational, and work-family conflict. Violanti et al. (2017), in their review of empirical research on stress and health in police officers between 1990 and 2016, classified two generalized categories of stress sources. The first category is stress arising from job content or occupational stressors, including sporadic work schedules, extended work hours, mandatory overtime, exposure to traumatic events, and threats to an officer's psychological and physical health (Violanti et al., 2017). The second category is stress arising from job context or organizational stressors, which includes organizational issues such as bureaucracy, policies, procedures, and relationships with supervisors and co-workers. Both job

context and job content stressors can negatively impact the wellness of police officers in all aspects of well-being.

Occupational Stressors. Stress resulting from the conditions or content of a job, such as shift work, overtime, sporadic schedules, exposure to traumatic events, and threats to one's psychological and physical health are often categorized as occupational or job content stressors (Lanza et al., 2018; Hurtado et al., 2018; Santa Maria et al., 2021; Violanti et al., 2017).

Occupational stressors can manifest themselves in many ways, including physical and psychological illness, as well as career related harm (Violanti et al., 2017). Violanti et al.'s (2017) systematic review of stress research in policing identified empirical evidence linking occupational stressors in law enforcement to physiological issues such as sleep disorders, metabolic syndrome, and cardiovascular diseases.

Hurtado et al. (2018) further support the impact of occupational stress on police officers with their empirical research on precarious work schedules and feelings of aggression in officers. The researcher's analysis of 129 anonymous surveys shows a correlation between work schedules, described as sporadic and precarious, with an increase in feelings of aggression reported by study participants. The study determined the occupational stressor of law enforcement as a 24 hour a day, seven day a week role that requires officers to work long hours, overnight, rotating shifts, as well as weekends and holidays increased these feelings of aggression in study participants. Additionally, Lanza et al.'s (2018) research on first responder mental health found that police officers, and other first responders, are experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at similar rates to the United States military personnel serving in combat zones. The daily exposure of police officers to potentially traumatic events, images, and situations has a negative impact on their emotions and behaviors (Lanza et al., 2018). The

negative impacts of post-traumatic stress disorder on police officers can be observed as issues between the officer and the public, the officer and their co-workers, the officer and their supervision, and the officer and their families.

Organizational Stressors. While the law enforcement profession is inherently dangerous and exposes officers to occupation stressors, organizational stressors or job context stressors cause equally significant stress for police officers (Saunders et al., 2019; Violanti et al, 2017). The negative impact of organizational stressors on police officers can manifest in many of the same physical and psychological conditions as the occupational stressors. In the previously mentioned systematic review of stress in policing, Violanti et al. (2017) identified empirical studies connecting organizational stressors to illnesses such as metabolic syndrome, cardiovascular diseases, and post-traumatic stress disorders. Saunders et al. (2019), in their interviews of 110 police organizations on current stressors in law enforcement, found that organizational stressors, such as inadequate equipment and bureaucracy, are as much of a concern for law enforcement organizations as occupational stressors. In addition, Brunetto et al.'s (2017) study on organizational support and police officer stress found organizational stressors highly impactful. The authors of this study examined the perceptions of 588 police officers on organizational bureaucracy and found a positive correlation between police management behavior and officer stress levels (Brunetto et al., 2017). Both studies support the idea that law enforcement leadership behavior impacts police officer well-being, specifically related to organizational stress (Brunetto et al., 2017; Saunders et al., 2019).

Work-Family Conflict. Work-family conflict is a third category of stress that many researchers consider distinct from occupational and organizational stressors in law enforcement (Griffin & Sun, 2017; Ma et al., 2015; Violanti et al., 2017). The researchers identify work-

family conflict as both a source and a result of stress of police work. The concept of work-family conflict is identified as an individual's focus on their occupational role that results in difficulties, or conflict, within the family role and vice versa. In their survey of 138 police officers, Griffin and Sun (2017) found that work-family conflict was positively related to stress and burnout. The study explored police officer's perspectives of the impact of work-related stress on their family lives and the impact of family stress on their professional lives (Griffin & Sun, 2017). Particularly, the study found that work-family conflict increased police officer stress and burnout in the study participants.

Continued research into stress in law enforcement and other aspects of police officer well-being, such as the currently proposed research, is vital to increasing the academic knowledge on the topic and improving the safety of communities (Lanza et al., 2018; Santa Maria et al., 2021; Violanti et al., 2017). The highly stressful occupation of policing further increases the risk of officer burnout if not adequately mitigated (Santa Maria et al., 2021). Job-related burnout in police officers can impact their physical health and increase absenteeism, causing additional stress for other officers to cover vacant shifts. Therefore, continued study on the impacts and mitigation of stress in policing, such as those proposed in the current dissertation project, is vital to police organizations and the communities they serve.

Servant Leadership and Police Officer Well-being

Servant Leadership theory challenges traditional beliefs on leadership by focusing on ethical behavior and demonstrating a concern for others that empowers followers to achieve success (Bilge et al., 2021; Jackson & Lee, 2019; Martin et al., 2017; Russell, 2019; Russell et al., 2018; Sousa & Dierendonck, 2017; Vito et al., 2011). Servant leaders create an environment that enables their followers to participate in the decision-making processes, provide the

opportunity for growth, and foster a sense of teamwork (Coetzer et al., 2017; Russell, 2019; Russell et al., 2018; Sousa & Dierendonck, 2017). Since law enforcement agencies' primary mission include serving the public safety needs of their communities, the Servant Leadership concept should easily translate to the natural ethos of law enforcement leaders (Coetzer et al., 2017; Dooley et al., 2020; Jit et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2017; Noor et al., 2018; Pathak & Jangalwa, 2018; Russell et al., 2018). These law enforcement leaders are predisposed to the notions and characteristics presented within the Servant Leadership model because many start their police careers as frontline officers who serve the law enforcement needs of their communities. Therefore, leaders serving the needs of frontline police officers as an effort to empower followers to provide law enforcement services within their communities is likely second nature to many police leaders. However, many law enforcement leaders experienced the traditional command-and-control leadership style early in their careers and these past behaviors serve as a model to leaders for future leadership interactions. Therefore, a shift in the organizational culture is necessary to change the generally acceptable leadership model in police agencies.

Research in Servant Leadership and its effectiveness in mitigating the adverse effects of police officer stress is an area of academic study that is lacking in empirical exploration. However, organizational management studies in other industries and careers do suggest promising results that may be transferable across genres of academic review (Bilge et al., 2021; Coetzer et al., 2017; Dooley et al., 2020; Jit et al., 2017; Pathak & Jangalwa, 2018; Sunday, 2016; Yasir & Mohamad, 2016). In particular, Jit et al.'s (2017) study of Servant Leadership theory's role in the emotional healing of followers found that servant leaders often develop a compassionate approach towards employees experiencing emotional turmoil. The researchers

conducted semi-structured interviews with leaders across multiple industrial genres including government, educational, and corporate organizations for their study (Jit et al., 2017). In this study, the participants were asked questions regarding their interactions with followers who were experiencing emotional turmoil to include identifying, understanding, empathizing, and addressing the employee's needs. The results from these interviews provided researchers with a conceptual model that linked the Servant Leadership characteristics of empathy, awareness, effective listening, thoughtfulness, stewardship, and healing to the restoration of employee emotional health.

Of the minimal academic studies within the arena of law enforcement officer well-being and Servant Leadership theory, Russell et al.'s (2018) case study of Servant Leadership and police officer well-being suggests a positive association between the Servant Leadership style and improved police officer well-being. The researchers in this case study focused on a single law enforcement agency that adopted Servant Leadership as an organizational framework for its human resources management and policing activities (Russell et al., 2018). Using open-ended qualitative questionnaires, the researchers uncovered four themes of Servant Leadership and police officer well-being. The themes that emerged from their research suggested agencies that use Servant Leadership offer growth opportunities for officers; are committed to emotional and mental health of officers; promote physical fitness and healthy living of officers; and build a culture of belonging for their personnel. While this study was small in sample size, it provides importance to the idea of Servant Leadership as an influential leadership style providing positive responses to police officer occupational stress and trauma. The case study provides a guide for future research and implementing Servant Leadership as a mitigating factor in police officer stress.

COVID-19 and Law Enforcement

Since early 2020, the novel coronavirus pandemic, also known as COVID-19, has affected nearly every aspect of life and every culture throughout the world (Alessandri et al., 2021; Boman & Owen, 2020; Campedelli et al., 2021; Frenkel et al., 2021; Gaitens et al., 2021; Jennings & Perez, 2020; Katzman et al., 2021; Rania et al., 2021; Ritchie & Gill, 2021; Scott & Gross, 2021; Stern, 2021; Stogner et al., 2020; Teti et al., 2020). The widespread impact of the pandemic and the worldwide attempts to control the spread of the virus have garnered academic interest across many fields of study. While still an emerging area of study, the COVID-19 pandemic has many researchers examining previous academic studies to determine the impact of the pandemic on extant theories. Rania et al. (2021) provide an example of the impact of COVID-19 on existing research with their study on adapting qualitative research methods during the pandemic. The authors examined the efficacy of online telecommunications methods for completing qualitative interviews and focus groups. Gaitens et al.'s (2021) research into COVID-19 and essential workers examined the impact of the pandemic on work-related illnesses, moral injury, and psychological stress in those employees deemed essential. The study suggests organizational leaders have the ability and duty, in certain circumstances, to manage tasks and resources, such as personal protective gear, to minimize workplace illnesses and exposure to the virus (Gaitens et al., 2021).

For law enforcement organizations and criminal justice research, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented opportunities for new avenues of understanding (Boman & Owen, 2020; Campedelli et al., 2021; Frenkel et al., 2021; Jennings & Perez, 2020; Scott & Gross, 2021; Stogner et al., 2020; Teti et al., 2020). Much of the emerging literature on COVID-19 and law enforcement focuses on the impact of crime rates and routine law enforcement tasks (Boman &

Owen, 2020; Brouzos et al., 2021; Campedelli et al., 2021; Jennings & Perez, 2020; Máskaly et al., 2021; McCarthy, 2021; Scott & Gross, 2021; Stern, 2021). Boman and Owen (2020), Campedelli et al. (2021), and Scott & Gross (2021) examined the impact of COVID-19 on crime in specific cities across the United States. Boman and Owen examined news articles from across the country in the weeks following the implementation of stay-at-home and social distancing orders, as well as calls for service from the Maumee Police Department. Campedelli et al. compared the crime data in Los Angeles over the first weeks after public health emergency declarations with data from the same time frame in the previous four years. Scott & Gross compared the crime rates of Chicago, Baltimore, and Baton Rouge in the first three months after stay-at-home orders were implemented with the same period during the prior three years. All three studies found that overall crime was down; however, a deeper examination found that reductions in crime were realized in property crimes, shoplifting, larceny, and other non-violent criminal activities (Boman & Owen, 2020; Campedelli et al., 2021; Scott & Gross, 2021). However, violent crimes seemed largely unimpacted during this period, and Boman and Owen's study suggests intimate partner violence crimes trended upwards.

Lum et al.'s (2020) gray literature supports the evidence gathered in previous studies. In this collaborative effort by the International Association of Chiefs of Police and the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy at George Mason University, the researchers analyzed survey responses received from nearly 1,000 law enforcement agencies in the United States and Canada (Lum et al., 2020). This survey indicated that calls for service had generally decreased for most police agencies; however, domestic and mental distress incidents increased or remained stable for approximately 80 percent of the responding organizations. The survey also found that COVID-19 significantly impacted agency operations, including reducing arrests for minor

offenses, limiting proactive policing and community engagement efforts, and suspending in-person academy training and in-service. The data gathered by these researchers significantly influences the current dissertation project by providing knowledge of various steps law enforcement leaders took in response to COVID-19.

Law Enforcement Leadership Responses to COVID-19

Beginning in March 2020, law enforcement leaders began grappling with the uncertainty associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (Frenkel et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2021; Jennings & Perez, 2020; Kyprianides et al., 2022; Laufs & Waseem, 2020; Lum et al., 2020; Pink et al., 2021; Shjarback & Magny, 2022; Stogner et al., 2020). Leaders were faced with having to respond to the unprecedented public health emergency by enforcing their community's public health acts, such as stay-at-home orders, business closures, face mask requirements, and responding to routine law enforcement matters while complying with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines (Jennings & Perez, 2020; Laufs & Waseem, 2020). Additionally, as new information was learned about the COVID-19 pandemic, the guidelines and recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention changed (Shjarback & Magny, 2022). Therefore, leaders in law enforcement agencies were forced to make decisions in response to COVID-19 with minimal and sometimes incorrect information (Kyprianides et al., 2022; Pink et al., 2021; Shjarback & Magny, 2022). At a recent police officer wellness event, a law enforcement executive leader discussing his agency's response to COVID-19 told the audience "If it felt like we were making stuff up, it was because we were" (Hanley, 2022).

The decisions made by law enforcement leaders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic varied based on many factors including agency size, resource availability, and geographic restrictions (Kyprianides et al., 2022; Pink et al., 2021; Shjarback & Magny, 2022; Stogner et al.,

2020). Law enforcement advocacy groups, such as the International Association of Chiefs of Police, published recommendations for protecting police officers and alternative methods for delivering essential law enforcement services (CRI-TAC, 2020). In this publication, law enforcement leaders were advised to train personnel on the use of personal protective equipment; developing contingency plans for shortages in staff; and communication both internally and externally about the agency's COVID-19 responses and changing policies. As alternative methods for delivering essential law enforcement services, the International Association of Chiefs of Police recommended triaging calls for service to determine which calls required a physical response – domestic violence, major crimes –and which minor incidents could be handled via a phone call – minor property crimes, noise complaints, vandalism. Additionally, law enforcement leaders were advised to evaluate traffic enforcement priorities to limit unnecessary officer to citizen contacts. While not all agencies adopted each of these recommendations, many were implemented in an effort to reduce unnecessary close contacts and to address the evolving circumstances associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of these decisions on policing and police officers have yet to be fully researched and served as a critical element of this current research project.

COVID-19 and Law Enforcement Well-being.

While there has been an increase in available research on COVID-19 in the past several months, there is a gap in the available literature related to the pandemic and law enforcement officer well-being. Few studies specifically addressed COVID-19 and law enforcement well-being at the time of this writing (Frenkel et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2021; Kyprianides et al., 2022; Pink et al., 2021; Shjarback & Magny, 2022; Stogner et al., 2020). Stogner et al.'s (2020) research on police stress, mental health, and resiliency during the COVID-19 pandemic was the

first of its kind and provided significant insight into the current research topic. The study extrapolated known data from the HIV epidemic of the 1980s and the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, to gauge the potential impact of COVID-19 on law enforcement officers' stress, mental health, and resiliency (Stogner et al., 2020). The authors identified the known and likely sources of stress for police officers during the pandemic, such as exposure to the virus, potentially exposing loved ones, covering shifts for ill colleagues, shortage of personal protective equipment, and other pandemic-related issues. In addition to identifying the importance of these stressors in policing the pandemic, the authors called for additional research into various elements and perspectives of the impact of COVID-19 on police officers and organizations.

The second relevant academic study on COVID-19 and police officer well-being originated outside of the United States of America. Frenkel et al. (2021) conducted a mixed methods research study on the impact of COVID-19 on European police officers. The authors conducted quantitative surveys of 2567 police officers from Austria, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Spain during the spring of 2020 (Frenkel et al., 2021). This research focused on police officer stress and work demands during the pandemic through the framework of transactional stress theory. Transactional stress theory posits that the individual weighs the stressfulness of the environmental demands against available resources to cope with the demands effectively. Qualitative open-ended questions were included to provide context to the quantitative results and were inductively coded. While the study results indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic moderately stressed European police officers, the generalizability of this research to American police officers are not entirely reliable. Each country within the European Union implemented responses to COVID-19 based on the laws of their own country. The United States' response to COVID-19 was different in many aspects, making reliability across groups

unachievable. However, the framework for this research provides a good reference point for the current dissertation study.

The remaining studies on COVID-19 and law enforcement well-being explore specific elements of well-being in police officers related to the pandemic. Huang et al.'s (2021) study of police officers in China explored the psychological distress experienced by the respondents during the pandemic. The study suggested increased feelings of distress among the participants related to their experiences policing during the pandemic. Kyprianides et al. (2022) surveyed officers in the United Kingdom and found that officer well-being was linked to the importance of the organizational climate being positive, which is characterized by increased communication and better supervisor/subordinate relationships. Finally, Pink et al.'s (2021) study of British police officers suggests resilience training has a positive impact on lowering distress associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Collaborative Reform Initiative – Technical Assistance Center (CRI-TAC) serves as a program within the Community Oriented Policing Services office of the United States Department of Justice. In cooperation with the International Association of Chiefs of Police, CRI-TAC (2020) provided information on officer wellness and resiliency in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This gray literature provided recommendations for police officers and deputies to mitigate the stress of the pandemic (CRI-TAC, 2020). Suggestions for stress mitigation include practicing mindfulness, taking care of one's physical health, staying connected to others while socially distancing, and seeking help when needed. The information provided by the CRI-TAC officer wellness document is valuable to the current research project for its ability to identify positive mitigation strategies for police officers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 and Grounded Theory

The COVID-19 pandemic has many impacts beyond medical implications for society (Teti et al., 2020). As a sociological event of global proportions, research methods studying the disparate effects must be well suited to address the complexities of this pandemic. As such, Teti et al. (2020) suggest the use of qualitative inquiry for unearthing the rich detail required to understand how individuals and groups make sense of the global pandemic. For example, the current dissertation research project seeks to fully understand how police officers perceive the impact of their law enforcement leaders' decisions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic on their well-being. Therefore, qualitative inquiry is appropriate for achieving the rich detail necessary to understand this phenomenon.

Diving deeper into the research on qualitative inquiry and theories, the grounded theory approach to gathering data in a nearly unprecedented global pandemic seems appropriate (Thurlow, 2020; Tie et al., 2019). Given the novel nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and its expansive impact, allowing the study participants' responses to drive the direction of theoretical understanding is vital. While the research on police officer well-being and law enforcement leadership theories provides direction, knowledge, and basis of importance for the study, the information received from the participants on their lived experiences during this time of global pandemic will drive this and future research on the topic. The rigorous methodological approach of grounded theory offered the level of detail necessary to fully understand how police officers perceived leadership decisions and COVID-19 from a well-being perspective.

Gaps in Literature

In reviewing the available literature on law enforcement leadership and police officer well-being, there is an absence of academic literature to help practitioners and academics

understand the impact of police leadership styles on the well-being of officers. Of the available literature, most focus on quantitative analysis from studies conducted in the United Kingdom and the European Union (Frenkel et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2021; Kyprianides et al., 2022; Pink et al., 2021). While these studies help add to the general topic of police officer well-being and leadership studies, there may be some generalization challenges when applying these studies to American law enforcement organizations. Additionally, the quantitative approach to these studies leaves many unanswered questions that a qualitative approach may be more adequately positioned to answer. The studies available for this academic review often focus on applying a theoretical approach to answer the problem of police officer well-being versus providing a better understanding of the perspectives of police officers from their own words and experiences. The research in this dissertation is positioned to address these gaps in the literature by exploring police officer perspectives on the impact of their leaders' decision-making and leadership styles on their well-being. The COVID-19 pandemic provides a unique backdrop to explore these perspectives while providing leaders with academic support and best practices for future long-term critical incidents in public safety.

Summary of Literature

The global COVID-19 pandemic provides researchers and practitioners with ample opportunities to explore new research avenues and reexamine previously explored topics from a new perspective. Within the context of law enforcement, the examination of COVID-19 pandemic topics has primarily been associated with crime rates and task changes across the country. There has been minimal research on COVID-19 and police officer well-being and a significant research gap on the impact of leader decision-making on police officer well-being. In reviewing the available literature on the elements of the proposed research project, several key

concepts present themselves for consideration. First, police officer well-being is a holistic approach to wellness that includes physical, psychological, emotional, familial, economic, and career wellness. Next, the stress in policing is often categorized into job content or job context. While both are inevitable in law enforcement, job context can be impacted by leadership styles and decision-making practices. Additionally, leadership styles, such as Servant Leadership, have positively impacted elements of police officer stress and overall well-being. Lastly, the impact of COVID-19 on law enforcement officers is an emerging area that is vital to explore and fully understand, with particular attention paid to the real experiences of those police officers on the frontlines of public safety during this pandemic.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

Understanding the impact of law enforcement leadership decisions on police officer well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic is vital for police agencies as they wrestle with balancing their organizational missions with the well-being of their police forces. The COVID-19 pandemic forced law enforcement leaders to reevaluate response plans, best practices, and the role of police in public health emergencies. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of police officers during an unprecedented time in world history. Therefore, the study design, data collection, and analysis were vital to obtaining the necessary rich details that will provide police leaders and criminal justice academics reliable information for similar events in the future.

Design

The current dissertation research project explored the impact of law enforcement leadership styles and decision-making on police officer well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two central research questions emerged after the literature on this topic was reviewed. The first research question was, “How did police officers perceive the impact of law enforcement leaders’ decision-making on their overall well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic?” The second research question was, “How did police officers perceive the impact of law enforcement leaders’ leadership style on their overall well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic?” Due to the criticality of the research topic to law enforcement organizations and the communities they serve, the research needed to be appropriately designed to obtain a better understanding of the relationship between police officer well-being and law enforcement leadership styles and decision-making (Glesne, 2016; Maxie & Babbie, 2018; Teti et al., 2021).

Therefore, the subsequent paragraphs will address the rationale and justification for the selected research design for this dissertation project.

Academic studies on police officer well-being rely on qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods designs and methodologies in their respective research designs (Brunetto et al., 2017; Hurtado et al., 2018; Lanza et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2017; Santa Maria et al., 2021; Saunders et al., 2019; Violanti et al., 2017). Similarly, law enforcement leadership styles and COVID-19 pandemic studies rely on varied research designs and methodologies (Can et al., 2017; Pyle & Cangemi, 2019; Frenkel et al., 2021; Jackson & Lee, 2019; Martin et al., 2017; Noor et al., 2018; Russell et al., 2018; Sousa & Dierendonck, 2017; Stogner et al., 2020). For example, Frenkel et al.'s (2021) research into the impact of COVID-19 on the stress of European police officers employed a mixed-methods approach to research design, with the bulk of their data coming from surveys that used primarily quantitative questioning and some open-ended qualitative questions. Jackson and Lee's (2019) case study on Servant Leadership in times of crisis employed a qualitative survey designed to gather detailed information from police chiefs in southeastern Virginia cities. The methodological approaches to academic research design have advantages, challenges, and requirements (Glesne, 2016; Maxfield & Babbie, 2018). The selection of a research design is driven primarily by the research questions and the topic.

Qualitative Inquiry

The research questions in this dissertation project sought to explore the lived experiences of law enforcement officers whose daily tasks, assignments, and overall well-being were impacted by the decisions made by the law enforcement leaders of their respective organizations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The absence of available research on the impact of law enforcement leadership styles and decision-making on police officer well-being, coupled with

the complex and nearly unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, made quantitatively testing hypotheses inadequate for this research study (Boman & Owen, 2020; Frenkel et al., 2021; Gaitens et al., 2021; Jennings & Perez, 2020; Lum et al., 2020; Stogner et al., 2020; Teti et al., 2021). Quantitative research primarily focuses on gathering numerical and statistical data and determining the relationships between the dependent and independent variables tested (Glesne, 2016; Maxfield & Babbie, 2018; Teti et al., 2021). While this approach is valuable for testing a known hypothesis or providing justification for a theoretical approach, quantitative research methods are not positioned to explore or explain a phenomenon that is still emerging. As Teti et al. (2021) explained in their recent study on research methods during the COVID-19 pandemic, quantitative methods answer many epidemiological questions but fail to conceptualize the social implications. Furthermore, deductive quantitative surveys and questionnaires do not offer the flexibility to adjust to the study participants' varied perspectives and realities necessary for this research project (Glesne, 2016; Maxfield & Babbie, 2018; Teti et al., 2021).

The literature supports that qualitative inquiry research design was the most appropriately positioned research design to answer the academic questions proposed by this study (Charmaz, 2017; Glesne, 2016; Hernandez et al., 2021; Maxfield & Babbie, 2018; Teti et al., 2021). Qualitative research designs focus on gathering non-numerical data, such as spoken words, video, and text, to understand a given phenomenon better. Research designed from a qualitative approach allows the participants' voices to be heard and their lived experiences to be understood (Hernandez et al., 2021). Teti et al. (2021) conveyed that qualitative research methods are invaluable in response to COVID-19 pandemic research because of the insight provided into how communities and individuals made sense of their experiences during the pandemic.

Furthermore, Charmaz (2017) identifies that the flexibility of the inductive qualitative research designs is advantageous to the rethinking and responsiveness to evolving research processes like the COVID-19 pandemic. As ideas emerge, the qualitative design allows the researcher to explore concepts that may have gone unnoticed in other design approaches (Charmaz, 2017; Teti et al., 2021). As the COVID-19 pandemic and the response of law enforcement agencies continue to evolve during the drafting of this manuscript, the flexibility afforded to the research by selecting the qualitative research design was paramount.

Qualitative research design is not without disadvantages that must be recognized throughout the proposed dissertation project. For example, one significant disadvantage to selecting the qualitative research design is the labor-intensive nature of the approach (Charmaz, 2017; Glesne, 2016; Maxfield & Babbie, 2018; Teti et al., 2021). In addition, the volume of audio, video, and text data involved in qualitative research can hinder many researchers. Therefore, many qualitative research studies use smaller sample sizes to gather data. However, this can also limit the generalizability across the larger population. Nevertheless, given the totality of the research design options, the criticality of the research questions, and the dearth of literature on the study topic, the advantages of the qualitative inquiry research design outweigh any challenges for the researcher.

Constructivist Grounded Theory

The potential methods for research within the qualitative inquiry design are as rich and varied as the data sought by these studies. Therefore, the selection of a research method must meet the needs of the research questions and be compared with the available literature on the given topic (Charmaz, 2017; Teti et al., 2021). For example, the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to the medical implications, was a sociological event of nearly unprecedented global

proportions (Frenkel et al., 2021; Stogner et al., 2020; Teti et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the literature on the COVID-19 pandemic is still emerging and, particularly around policing, has little theoretical exploration. Qualitative research methods like phenomenology, which describes and interprets lived experiences, would partially address the proposed research questions (Charmaz, 2017; Maxfield & Babbie, 2018; Teti et al., 2021). However, phenomenology lacks the ability to explore an emerging or underexplored concept like this dissertation project proposed to understand. Additionally, phenomenology would not result in a new theory that can be utilized by law enforcement leaders, scholars, or policymakers.

The constructivist grounded theory brings an open-minded approach to research that was necessary to understand what was happening and develop a well-reasoned theoretical approach to theory development (Charmaz, 2017). Grounded theory, as developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, takes the rich data obtained from research participants' accounts and perspectives to develop theory inductively (Charmaz, 2017; Thurlow, 2020; Tie et al., 2019). The approach allows researchers to develop meaning from emotions, human interactions, interpretations, and perspectives, which are subjective by nature. Researchers further expounded on the early concepts of grounded theory throughout the years by recognizing the importance of the researcher, the process, historical context, and other situational conditions to the respective study (Charmaz, 2017). The researcher then uses the elements of the research to construct a robust theory.

In the constructivist grounded theory method, the researcher explores the available literature on the topic to understand the study's position in relevant academic research (Charmaz, 2017; Thurlow, 2020; Tie et al., 2019). The data gathering is an iterative process whereby the researcher obtains the initial participant data, analyzes this information, and allows the data to

inform the future data-gathering efforts. The process continues until theoretical saturation is reached and a robust theory is developed. For this dissertation project, the constructivist grounded theory was the appropriate method for gathering the perspectives of police officers regarding the impact of law enforcement leader decision-making on their well-being related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This methodology sought to inform law enforcement leaders on best practices for future pandemic-style incidents from a reasoned theoretical approach developed from the analysis of the research data with academically supported existing leadership studies.

Semi-Structured Conversational Interview

Gathering rich, worthwhile data in qualitative constructivist grounded theory research is best accomplished by talking with participants one-on-one or through interviews (Charmaz, 2017; Teti et al., 2020; Thurlow, 2020; Tie et al., 2019). Therefore, this dissertation research data collection method utilized the semi-structured conversational interview technique. In this approach, the researcher scoured the available literature on similarly associated topics to influence the development of interview questions (Charmaz, 2017; Glesne, 2016; Maxfield & Babbie, 2018). While there is a dearth of available research directly on the proposed research topic, there were similarly situated studies that aided this researcher in developing interview questions that stimulated the participants' involvement and provided some boundaries to the interview, which allowed the focus to remain closely associated to the desired topic. For example, Frenkel et al.'s (2021) quantitative research on stress, job demands, and coping mechanisms of European police officers during stages of the COVID-19 pandemic provided a line of questioning that could prove an invaluable resource upon which to expand. Additionally, Russell et al.'s (2018) qualitative case study on Servant Leadership and police officer well-being

influenced the interview questions to explore police officer perceptions of how agency decisions were made in response to large-scale events such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The advantage, however, to the semi-structured conversational interview is that the research participants' responses to the interview questions can spur knowledge unimagined by the researcher (Charmaz, 2017; Glesne, 2016; Maxfield & Babbie, 2018; Thurlow, 2020; Tie et al., 2019). Through the semi-structured conversational interview approach, the researcher becomes an instrument for data gathering, and care must be given to control inherent personal biases while building a rapport and comfort level with the participant to foster trust. Since the goal of the constructivist grounded theory is to produce new themes and theoretical constructs, the prospect of new and emerging ideas gleaned from research participant perspectives was invaluable to this project. Moreover, the constructivist grounded theory approach is an iterative process that allowed the results of previous interview responses to influence future interviews until theoretical saturation is achieved (Charmaz, 2017; Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Glesne, 2016; Maxfield & Babbie, 2018; Thurlow, 2020; Tie et al., 2019). Theoretical saturation is defined as the point at which further data collection and analysis no longer yields new findings or categories related to the research questions.

The researcher gleans and organizes the interview questions from available literature but allows the interview to unfold as a conversation with the participant (Charmaz, 2017; Maxfield & Babbie, 2018). The participant's responses to the interview questions are expanded upon when necessary and can drive the interview to areas not expected by the researcher. Coupled with the constructivist grounded theory approach, the researcher analyzes the results of one interview and adjusts the subsequent interviews to explore emerging themes or concepts further. With the semi-structured conversational interview approach, this dissertation project was flexible to the

emerging concepts and the evolving circumstances discovered through the data gathering process.

Research Questions

1. How did police officers perceive the impact of law enforcement leaders' decision-making on their overall well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How did police officers perceive the impact of law enforcement leaders' leadership style on their overall well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Setting

An appropriate setting was necessary to understand how police officers perceive the impact of law enforcement leaders' decision-making and leadership style on their overall well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead of selecting a single law enforcement organization to study for this project, the researcher desired police officer perspectives from multiple organizations to obtain richer data that can be generalized across various sized law enforcement agencies. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted law enforcement organizations globally; however, an agency's response to the crisis was often driven by the circumstances in their respective jurisdictions. Since the focus of this research is on law enforcement generally and not a specific organization, selecting a geographic region that is comprised of a cross-section of various types of law enforcement organizations was crucial to the study.

In evaluating potential regions for the setting of this research, the researcher narrowed the geographical focus to include law enforcement agencies within the Central Virginia Region as defined by the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service at the University of Virginia (Demographics Research Group, 2017). The selection of the Central Virginia Region law

enforcement agencies allowed the researcher to gain the rich data desired from this qualitative constructivist grounded theory approach. Within this geographical area, law enforcement agencies vary to include urban, suburban, and rural policing. Additionally, this region is rich with a multitude of law enforcement organizations, including police departments, college and university agencies, sheriff's offices, and statewide police departments. Therefore, the approach to targeting multiple organizations within this region offered an increased likelihood of uncovering rich data on the lived experiences of police officers who perceived their leaders' decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their overall well-being and to understand both the positive and negative impacts of those decisions.

Participants

Constructivist grounded theory often uses a concept known as theoretical sampling to select the research participants, whereby the researcher chooses subjects that can inform the theory development (Charmaz, 2017; Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Thurlow, 2020). For instance, there would be little to no theoretical advantage to including command-level law enforcement leaders in a study that aims to understand the impact of the decisions made by these leaders on their subordinates' well-being. Since these leaders make decisions that affect how, when, where, and to what degree the frontline officer does their jobs, there would be minimal fruitful information beneficial to this study. Therefore, the research participants were those police officers, detectives, and first-line supervisors directly impacted by the changes in policy, procedures, and other leadership decisions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. First-line supervisors were included in the candidate pool of research participants due to their positioning within the organization. While these participants are supervisors, they are often impacted by the

ambiguity and uncertainty of command and executive-leader decisions and have minimal control of that decision-making process within a traditional command-and-control leadership structure.

It is important to note that the author of this dissertation research is a 24-year veteran of a law enforcement organization with state-wide enforcement authority within the Commonwealth of Virginia. Furthermore, this researcher serves as a lieutenant within the law enforcement organization and is tasked with developing and implementing various policies to include many in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the potentially sensitive nature of the research topic and the researcher's leadership authority, no law enforcement officer from the author's agency participated in this study. Moreover, with the sensitivity of the research topic and the author's time within the profession, no police officer with a close, personal relationship with the researcher participated in this study. However, the author utilized professional networking capabilities, social media, and professional organizations to solicit participant involvement. A minimum of 10 police officers or first-line supervisors were anticipated to be interviewed for this study in expectation of reaching theoretical saturation. The participants were required to be current sworn police officers at the time of the interview and engaged in a law enforcement professional capacity before March 2020.

Procedures

In compliance with Liberty University Helms School of Government's Dissertation Guide (2022), Institutional Review Board approval was necessary for this research because it involves human subject participation. Therefore, Institutional Review Board approval was the first step in the research procedure before recruiting any research participants (Appendix A). Upon approval, four methods of recruitment of participants were utilized. The first solicitations were to law enforcement agency heads in the geographical Central Virginia Region, as

previously described, through a permission letter (Appendix D). Secondary solicitations were sent to law enforcement associations and professional organizations servicing the geographical Central Virginia Region, as previously described, through a permission letter (Appendix E). Thirdly, solicitations via social media describing the study, its purpose, and criteria for participation were placed on various social media platforms (Appendix F). The last solicitation method used was the snowballing technique where initial participants were asked to engage with their colleagues that fit the study criteria for participation. Each participant involved in the data collection phases of this study were provided with written informed consent and acknowledged this consent before data collection commenced (Appendix G).

As participants were selected, the qualitative open-ended questionnaire was the first step of data collection. This questionnaire aided the researcher in the final selection of study participants and supported the collection of rich data necessary for a constructivist grounded theory method. After the participants completed the qualitative open-ended questionnaire, the semi-structured conversational interviews were conducted. Each interview was part of an iterative process that further informed the subsequent interviews. Therefore, the data analysis process began once each interview was completed and continued until data saturation was achieved. Throughout this process, the researcher conducted reflexive memo journaling to bracket any potential biases and to document decisions made throughout the data collection and analysis process.

The Researcher's Role

With the semi-structured conversational interview approach, the researcher is an active participant in the process of constructing knowledge (Roberts, 2020). The researcher's role in this process was to elicit responses from the interviewee that increased understanding and sought

further clarification. As an active participant in the interview process, the researcher must recognize and control their individual biases not to influence the participant's response (Charmaz, 2017; Roberts, 2020). Furthermore, the researcher in this study was the primary investigator analyzing the data collected. Therefore, recognizing and controlling for researcher bias in the analysis of data was just as crucial to the credibility of the study as it was in the interview.

As a command-level leader in a law enforcement organization before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, this researcher had to take proactive steps to avoid introducing personal experiences or expectations into the interview questions or the participant's responses. Roberts (2020) suggests that researchers recognize that the purpose of the qualitative interview is not to answer the questions but to listen to the participant's stories and experiences. Designing interview questions with the idea that the participant is the expert in their experiences helps to control researcher biases (Roberts, 2020). Additionally, practicing reflexive memo journaling during the data collection and analysis process was vital to avoid introducing biases into the research (Charmaz, 2017; Roberts, 2020; Thurlow, 2020). Through reflexive writing, this researcher was able to recognize personal feelings, assumptions, and expectations that were brought into the data collection and analysis process and control for those biases bringing greater credibility to the study.

Data Collection

Conducting qualitative research based on a constructivist grounded theory approach allows the data collected to drive future data-gathering efforts to develop a robust theory answering the research questions (Charmaz, 2017; Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Glesne, 2016; Maxfield & Babbie, 2018; Thurlow, 2020; Tie et al., 2019). In addition, the constructivist

grounded theory is an open-minded approach to research that does not ignore the contributions of past rigorous literature on similarly explored topics (Charmaz, 2017; Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Thurlow, 2020). From this approach, the data provided by research participants are rich, detailed, and from their perspectives, which allows researchers to ascribe meaning to the personal human interactions, emotions, and perspectives uncovered. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, three data collection methods were used in a process also known as triangulation (Renz et al., 2018). The three data collection methods used in this research were qualitative open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and reflexive memo journaling.

Qualitative Open-Ended Questionnaires

The first step in collecting data for this research project was the use of a qualitative open-ended questionnaire. The researcher designed the questionnaire in an electronic format to serve as a preemptive gathering tool for demographic information on the participants and to gain some early insight into the participants' perspectives on the COVID-19 pandemic related to their overall well-being (see Table 1 below and Appendix B). In addition, the open-ended questionnaire allows for the exploration of the participants' lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic without the potential influence of an interviewer (Frenkel et al., 2021).

Table 1

Open-Ended Questionnaire

Questionnaire Questions	Research Question
1. Tell me about your law enforcement organization. Approximately how many personnel? Description of community served (urban, suburban, rural).	
2. Tell me about your law enforcement career. How many years of service? Current rank? General description of duties?	
3. How would you describe your overall well-being prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?	RQ1 & RQ2

4. Apart from the COVID19 crisis, are you currently exposed to any extraordinary private stressors (e.g., infection or death of a relative, divorce)?	RQ1 & RQ2
5. How do you compare the COVID-19 pandemic to other emergencies you deal with in your career related to your well-being?	RQ1 & RQ2

The overall structure of the questionnaire was to further the researcher's ability to develop a purposive sample of participants that represented different policing responsibilities in the Central Virginia Region. Additionally, the questionnaire was structured to confirm that the participants met the required demographics of the research questions, namely police officers and first-line supervisors. Finally, questions 3 – 4 of the questionnaire addressed elements of the COVID-19 pandemic and offered the researcher insight into the participants' lived perspectives.

Semi-Structured Conversational Interviews

The second step in the process of collecting data for this research project was to invite the subjects to participate in semi-structured conversational interviews. The researcher designed the interview questions to ascertain the rich detail of the personal perspectives of the participants. The semi-structured nature of the questions allowed for the participants' lived perspectives to be the focus of the interview while providing a framework to contextualize the discussion. The framework of the interview questions allowed the researcher to explore the participants' perspectives towards the COVID-19 pandemic and how their leaders made decisions that impacted police officers.

The interviews were conducted outside of the participants' employing agency since there was no direct affiliation between this study and any law enforcement organization. Participants were offered the opportunity for in-person or teleconferencing interviews. This option was to provide the participant with an added layer of comfort due to the continued impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of the data collection, as well as providing for an additional

level of confidentiality. Each interview was expected to last between 30 to 60 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded utilizing the Otter.ai transcription software.

Table 2

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Semi-Structured Interview Questions	Research Question
1. Tell me your general thoughts about the COVID-19 pandemic.	RQ1 & RQ2
2. How does the unknown status of COVID-19 of coworkers and citizen contacts make you feel?	RQ1 & RQ2
3. How did the COVID-19 pandemic change how you did your job?	RQ1 & RQ2
4. What policy changes related to COVID-19 made by leaders did you perceive as positive?	RQ1
5. How did these changes positively impact your well-being?	RQ1
6. Are these changes still in place, and how do you feel about that?	RQ1
7. What policy changes related to COVID-19 made by leaders did you perceive as negative?	RQ1
8. How did these changes negatively impact your well-being?	RQ1
9. Are those changes still in place, and how do you feel about that?	RQ1
10. How do you feel about the process used by leaders to make decisions in response to COVID-19?	RQ2
11. How would you describe the leadership characteristics of your law enforcement leaders making decisions on COVID-19 issues?	RQ2
12. How would you describe your overall well-being today?	RQ1 & RQ2

Question 1 was designed as an ice breaker question to let the participant become relaxed and accustomed to the researcher (Roberts, 2020; Tie et al., 2019). The ice breaker question aimed to establish an open environment in which the participant felt comfortable and to be honest and thorough in their responses. Additionally, question 1 informed the research about the participant's perspectives towards the COVID-19 pandemic in general. As the COVID-19

pandemic became widespread, individual perspectives on the virus ranged from the virus being nothing more than a cold to panic and isolation from others (Stern, 2021; Stogner et al., 2020). Questions 2 and 3 explored the perceptions of the participants related to COVID-19 and their role as a police officer. Questions 4 to 9 explored the participants' perceptions of the policies and procedures that were implemented during COVID-19 and how those changes impacted the participants. Questions 10 and 11 explored the participants' perceptions of the processes used by leaders to make the decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, question 12 explored the participants' perceptions of their overall well-being at the time of the interview.

Reflexive Memo Journaling

The final element of the data collection process was reflexive memo journaling and occurred throughout the entire data collection and analysis process (Renz et al., 2018). As a current law enforcement leader, this researcher recognized that my personal experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic could bias my data collection and analysis process. Reflexive memo journaling were an effective method to bracket and limit the researcher's influence on the data. Additionally, reflexive memo journaling provided added credibility and trustworthiness to the study by documenting the decisions made by the researcher and theories derived from the data collection and analysis. Completing these reflexive memos throughout the process was critical to successfully interpreting the data.

Data Analysis

The primary data gathered for this dissertation research project was obtained through one-on-one semi-structured conversational interviews between the researcher and the participant. With the participant's consent, the researcher recorded the interview for future transcription and analysis consistent with the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2017; Glaser &

Strauss, 2017; Thurlow, 2020). The interviews were expected to take 30 to 60 minutes for each participant, depending on their level of engagement and experiences during the pandemic. Transcribing each interview for analysis prior to the subsequent interviews was a vital but labor-intensive process. Therefore, the researcher used recent technological advances in real-time recording and transcription applications to facilitate this process. Specifically, the researcher evaluated the Otter.ai platform, a mobile and computer application that allows the user to record the audio of a conversation and that uses machine learning technology to transcribe the conversations in near-real-time (Lai, 2021). Upon completion of the transcription, the researcher can review the audio and text files to make any manual corrections necessary. Additionally, the auto-transcription application provides the user with high-level keyword coding that can be useful for the research or disregarded after investigation.

Upon completing and comparing the transcription files, the researcher then coded and categorized the data to look for emerging themes and commonalities (Charmaz, 2017; Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Thurlow, 2020; Tie et al., 2019). Coding data is critical to establishing the link between the collected data and constructing a theory that explains the phenomenon (Charmaz, 2017). A code is the researcher's definition or interpretation of the data analyzed and is used to provide meaning to the participant's perspectives (Charmaz, 2017; Thurlow, 2020; Tie et al., 2019). Coding is an iterative process that begins with initial, focused, and theoretical coding. The analysis results may modify future interview questions as the first interviews are completed, transcribed, and initially coded. The iterative process and interview question modification is an advantage of the constructivist grounded theory approach.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in a qualitative research project is derived from the methods the investigator uses that demonstrate the reliability and accuracy of the data collection (Nowell et al., 2017; Roberts, 2020; Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). The criteria that demonstrate the data collection and analysis trustworthiness include credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. In addition, these criteria validate that the researcher has addressed the ethical considerations of the research in a manner generally acceptable.

Credibility

The first critical element of trustworthiness of this research study of police officer perspectives on the impact of leader decisions on their well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic is credibility. Credibility in a qualitative research project is described as a focus on the fit between the views of the study participants and how the researcher represents those views (Nowell et al., 2017). While there are a number of techniques that a researcher can use to operationalize the credibility of a study, this research project used member checking and data collection triangulation. Member checking is accomplished by providing the study participants with a summary of the findings associated with their respective interviews. The member checking allows the participants to validate the researcher's understanding of their lived experiences. Data collection triangulation is accomplished in this study through the use of qualitative open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured conversational interviews, and reflexive memo journaling.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability and confirmability are the next steps in documenting the trustworthiness of a research project. These two elements are closely related in methodology but serve different

purposes related to study trustworthiness (Nowell et al., 2017; Roberts, 2020). Dependability in a qualitative research project is defined as the ability of others to examine the research process (Nowell et al., 2017). By clearly documenting the choices and methods used throughout the study, others can judge the rationale used by this researcher in the methods and decision-making throughout the data collection and analysis. The use of multiple data collection methods and the reflexive memo journaling aids readers of this study in judging the dependability of the research.

In a qualitative research project, confirmability establishes the clear derivation of the researcher's findings and interpretations from the data collected (Nowell et al., 2017). The researcher must adequately demonstrate how interpretations of the data are reached, and conclusions are drawn so that others can replicate the process (Nowell et al., 2017; Roberts, 2020; Rogers, 2018). This research project was based on the constructivist grounded theory approach to qualitative analysis, and therefore documentation of the steps taken to arrive at conclusions or interpret data from the participants was vital to the development of a theory as well as presenting confirmability of the process (Charmaz, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017). The use of reflexive memo journaling throughout the data gathering and analysis process provided the framework for documenting confirmability and future replication (Roberts, 2020; Rogers, 2018).

Transferability

Nowell et al. (2017) describe transferability as the ability to generalize the qualitative research to another avenue of inquiry. While knowing the other avenues that future researchers may wish to transfer a study's findings are impossible to predict, researchers have the responsibility to provide detailed descriptions of the processes used so that future researchers can make appropriate transferability decisions on their own (Nowell et al., 2017; Roberts, 2020). In addition, the research gathered in this project has the potential to be analyzed and utilized by

other like-minded researchers focused on police leader decision-making and officer well-being across the United States. Therefore, the detailing of the steps taken throughout this research project, including the qualitative questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, detailed reflexive memo journaling, and analysis of the data gathered, is vital to the transferability of this study.

Ethical Considerations

Taking into consideration all potential ethical issues is critical in a study involving individual well-being. Before any data collection, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained and was critical to ensuring the research is conducted ethically (see Appendix A). Establishing and maintaining confidentiality is vital to obtaining the necessary rich, honest, and detailed information from participants. As a leader in a law enforcement organization and a 24-year veteran of policing in the region where this study occurred presented unique ethical concerns regarding a participant's voluntary involvement and openness to discussing the perspectives police officers have of their leaders' decision-making during COVID-19. To address this concern, no participants were solicited from this researcher's law enforcement organization. Additionally, participants had no previous close personal friendship or involvement with this researcher. Those participants of this study were introduced to the researcher as an academic professional versus a fellow law enforcement professional.

All participants were provided with informed consent regarding this study and were made aware that their involvement was voluntary. Participants were provided pseudonyms to maintain anonymity throughout the process with contact made via their personal email addresses, not their work emails. Additionally, participants were provided the opportunity to participate in the interview via Microsoft Teams web conferencing software to protect against the continuation of the COVID-19 virus and to ensure anonymity. All data derived from the questionnaires and

interviews were securely maintained in a password-protected external hard drive for three years post-study completion, then destroyed appropriately. No raw data was shared with any law enforcement organization, and participants were made aware of their confidential involvement with this study.

Participants of this study were compensated for their time upon completing the questionnaire and the interview. While sometimes controversial, participant compensation is an acceptable and effective practice to increase participant response rates (Chef, 2018; Jia et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2019; Yu et al., 2017). When providing compensation for participants, careful consideration must be given to the participation incentive type and amount to ensure the participants' involvement remains voluntary. After carefully reviewing the available literature on participant compensation, this researcher offered each participant a \$25 Amazon.com gift card as an incentive and gratitude for their participation in the study.

Summary

The method and process for gathering data in this qualitative dissertation project were vital for understanding the impact of leadership decision-making on police officer well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. The constructivist grounded theory approach to research was determined to be the most appropriate approach to understanding the lived experiences of police officers during the global health crisis due to the unprecedented impact of the pandemic. Examining police officers and first-line supervisors from the Central Virginia Region allowed for a diverse participant population due to the area's mix of urban, suburban, and rural police departments, sheriff's offices, and other law enforcement organizations. The use of qualitative open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and reflexive memo journaling provided

the researcher with the necessary rich data to analyze and develop new or understudied theories related to leadership and police officer well-being.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative constructivist grounded theory study was to explore the lived experiences of police officers as it relates to the impact of their organizational leaders' decisions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The objective of this chapter in the dissertation manuscript is to focus on the study's findings. The research was guided by two specific research questions, which were:

1. How did police officers perceive the impact of law enforcement leaders' decision-making on their overall well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How did police officers perceive the impact of law enforcement leaders' leadership style on their overall well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic?

This chapter contains the demographic information describing each participant of the study. In addition, the study results are presented by introducing themes developed through data analysis.

Participants

Participants in this study were selected based on their ability to inform and answer the research questions. The first step was a participant eligibility screening that gathered preliminary demographic information and ensured the participants met the eligibility requirements of the research. The eligibility requirements included currently serving as a police officer in the Central Virginia Region, this active service must have begun before March 2020, the police officer must have been serving in a role as a frontline officer or first-line supervisor, and the participant must not work for the organization that this researcher is an affiliate. Nineteen respondents completed the screening eligibility, and of those, 17 were determined to meet the eligibility requirements. Those 17 participants were then invited to complete the open-ended questionnaire, which

provided each participant with informed consent as was required and approved by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (Appendix A), solicited their initial thoughts on the COVID-19 pandemic, and confirmed the participants' willingness to meet for an in-person or virtual interview at their discretion. Of the eligible 17 participants, 12 completed the open-ended questionnaire and indicated their desire to continue with the semi-structured interview process.

The 12 participants who completed the open-ended questionnaire were invited to be interviewed for this study. One participant was female, ten were male, and one preferred not to indicate their gender. Age ranges were used to maintain the confidentiality of the participants. Three participants were between 20 and 29 years of age, three participants were between 30 and 39 years of age, three participants were between 40 and 49 years of age, and three were between 50 and 59 years of age. Participant race was mostly consistent with the demographics of law enforcement officers in the Central Virginia Region, with eight participants identifying as white, two identifying as Hispanic, one identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native, and one preferring not to say. However, there were no participants that identified as African American or Asian. All participants had some college education, with the largest concentration, five, falling into the master's degree category, three in the bachelor's degree category, and the remaining four in the some college category.

The selection of participants for this study focused on gathering data from those who are situated to best inform the research. The years of law enforcement experience by the participant group was evenly distributed, with three participants having five or fewer years, two having between six and ten years, one between 11 and 15 years, two between 16 and 20 years, two between 21 and 25 years, and two with greater than 31 years of law enforcement experience. There was an adequate distribution of position classifications represented in the participant

group, with two first-line supervisors, six uniformed patrol officers, and four investigators or detectives. Additionally, the participant group provided a satisfactory representation of the organizational types in the Central Virginia Region, with one from a rural sheriff's office, one from a suburban police department, four from an urban police department, and six from an urban university police department. Table 3 summarizes the participant demographics for quick review and reference.

Table 3

Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Age Range	Race	Education Level	Law Enforcement Experience	Position Classification	Organization Type
Participant #1	Male	40-49	White	Master's degree	21-25 years	Plain Clothes Detective/Special Agent/Investigator	Urban
Participant #2	Male	50-59	White	Master's degree	31+ years	Uniformed Field Officer/Deputy	Urban / University
Participant #3	Male	50-59	White	Bachelor's degree	21-25 years	Front- or First-Line Supervisor	Suburban
Participant #4	Male	20-29	White	Some College	0-5 years	Plain Clothes Detective/Special Agent/Investigator	Urban
Participant #5	Male	50-59	White	Master's degree	31+ years	Uniformed Field Officer/Deputy	Urban / University
Participant #6	Male	30-39	White	Bachelor's degree	6-10 years	Uniformed Field Officer/Deputy	Urban / University
Participant #7	Prefer not to say	30-39	Prefer not to say	Some College	6-10 years	Plain Clothes Detective/Special Agent/Investigator	Urban / University
Participant #8	Male	40-49	Hispanic	Some College	16-20 years	Uniformed Field Officer/Deputy	Urban / University
Participant #9	Male	20-29	Hispanic	Some College	0-5 years	Uniformed Field Officer/Deputy	Urban
Participant #10	Male	40-49	White	Bachelor's degree	16-20 years	Front- or First-Line Supervisor	Rural
Participant #11	Female	30-39	White	Master's degree	11-15 years	Plain Clothes Detective/Special Agent/Investigator	Urban

Participant #12	Male	20-29	American Indian or Alaska Native	Master's degree	0-5 years	Uniformed Field Officer/Deputy	Urban / University
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Participant #1

Participant #1 (P1) was a white male police detective between 40 and 49 years of age at the time of his participation in this study. P1 held a master's degree and worked in a local law enforcement agency located within an urban environment. He has worked in various positions within the agency throughout his career, which spanned between 21 to 25 years of service at the time of his interview. P1 described his overall well-being before the COVID-19 pandemic as "healthy, but could have done better" and indicated he was under no extraordinary private stressors outside the pandemic.

Participant #2

Participant #2 (P2) identified himself as a white male uniformed police officer between the ages of 50 and 59 at the time of this study. P2 has worked in different law enforcement organizations over his more than 31 years of law enforcement experience. His highest level of education completed is a master's degree. In the recent period before the COVID-19 pandemic and through his participation in this study, P2 worked in an urban university police department. He described his overall well-being before the COVID-19 pandemic as "good," though he did indicate some family and career-related stressors unrelated to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participant #3

Participant #3 (P3) was a white male first-line supervisor of a largely suburban police department. At the time of his interview, P3 was between 50 and 59 years of age, with between 21 and 25 years of service. He has worked within multiple areas of his agency throughout his

career, with his most recent position being a supervisor in the agency's patrol division. P3 holds a bachelor's degree as his highest level of education. P3 listed the uncertainties associated with his future transition into retirement as a source of stress unrelated to the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides these stressors, P3 recorded his overall well-being before the COVID-19 pandemic as good.

Participant #4

Participant #4 (P4) was between 20 and 29 years of age and had between zero and five years of service in law enforcement. He worked as a detective with an urban police department at the time of his interview. P4 identified himself as a white male with some college as his highest level of education. Though he listed his overall well-being before the pandemic as optimistic, P4 mentioned work-life balance and his spouse's illness as his most significant stressors unrelated to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participant #5

Participant #5 (P5) was a white male patrol officer with an urban university police department. P5 has worked for multiple law enforcement organizations, culminating in a 31+ year career in policing. He was between 50 and 59 years of age and holds a master's degree as his highest level of education. P5 reported his overall well-being before the COVID-19 pandemic as focused on success and echoed many other participants in indicating his main stressors unrelated to the pandemic as family health issues.

Participant #6

Participant #6 (P6) was a white male between 30 and 39 years of age at the time of his participation in this study. P6 served as a patrol officer with an urban university police department, with six to ten years of law enforcement experience. He holds a bachelor's degree as

his highest level of education. When asked about his well-being before the COVID-19 pandemic, P6 referenced shiftwork as a stressor and specifically called out working the overnight shift as feeling less productive than when he worked the day shift. P6's reported stressor outside of the COVID-19 pandemic was his occupation as a police officer.

Participant #7

Participant #7 (P7) identified their age range as between 30 and 39 years of age and indicated they had between six and ten years of law enforcement experience. P7 indicated they were an investigator and had some college as their highest level of education. When asked how they would describe their overall well-being before the COVID-19 pandemic, P7 described their well-being as average. P7, like many of the other participants, indicated that their stressors unrelated to the pandemic were family health issues.

Participant #8

Participant #8 (P8) was between 40 and 49 years of age, with some college as his highest level of education. P8 described himself as a Hispanic male with between 16 and 20 years of law enforcement experience. He served as a uniform police officer working for a university police department within an urban environment at the time of his interview. P8 described his well-being before the COVID-19 pandemic as doing better after receiving assistance from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). When asked about stressors outside of the pandemic, P8 indicated no extraordinary stressors.

Participant #9

Participant #9 (P9) served as a uniform police officer with an urban university police department at the time of his participation in this study. P9 identified himself as a Hispanic male between 20 and 29 years of age. He reported some college experience as his highest level of

education. He had worked in law enforcement between zero and five years at the time of his participation in the study. P9 reported his well-being before the COVID-19 pandemic as fantastic, and he reported no additional extraordinary stressors outside the pandemic.

Participant #10

Participant #10 (P10) worked as a first-line supervisor for a Sheriff's Office in a community that he identified as a mixture of suburban and rural environments. P10 was a white male between the ages of 40 and 49 with a bachelor's degree as his highest level of education. He has served in law enforcement between 16 and 20 years. P10 described his pre-pandemic well-being as very well mentally, emotionally, and physically. Additionally, P10 indicated that he had no extraordinary stressors outside of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participant #11

Participant #11 (P11) was the only participant in the research study who identified as a female police officer. P11 indicated that she was a white female between 30 and 39 years of age and held a master's degree at the time of her interview. She served as a police detective in an urban law enforcement organization. P11 indicated she had between 11 and 15 years of law enforcement experience. P11 described her overall well-being as pretty good before the COVID-19 pandemic. As with many other participants, P11's extraordinary stressors outside the COVID-19 pandemic revolved around family stressors.

Participant #12

Participant #12 (P12) was a 20- to 29-year-old male patrol officer at the time of his participation in this research study. P12 identified his race as American Indian or Alaska Native. He had served in law enforcement for between zero and five years and worked for an urban police department. P12 holds a master's degree as his highest level of education. He described

his well-being before the COVID-19 pandemic and indicated no extraordinary stressors outside of the pandemic.

Results

As a qualitative constructivist grounded theory research study, three data collection methods were used to gather rich, detailed descriptions of the participant's lived experiences, perspectives, and how the participants made meaning of these experiences. After their selection for participation, each participant was asked to complete an open-ended questionnaire as the beginning method of data collection. I reviewed these open-ended questionnaires to gain initial insight into the participants perspectives and to inform the next phase of data collection. The next method of collection was the semi-structured interview of each participant. These interviews resulted in 158 pages of raw transcripts for the research to review and analyze for relevant information. Lastly, I memorialized reflexive memos throughout the collection of data to document decisions made during the data collection and review processes to prevent researcher biases.

Through constant comparative and iterative analysis of the data provided by the participants, six themes were identified, which aided in answering the two research questions of this study. These themes were the *unprecedented*, *job to do*, *family impact*, *negative impact*, *positive impact*, and *leadership characteristics*. Analysis of these themes in comparison to the research questions follows.

Theme Development

Data was collected for this study through the use of an open-ended qualitative questionnaire, the semi-structured interview, and reflexive memo journaling. While the open-ended qualitative questionnaire and the reflexive memo journaling provided the triangulation

necessary for trustworthiness, the semi-structured interviews served as the primary data source. The qualitative open-ended questionnaires were conducted using the Microsoft Forms application and aided me in gathering initial perspectives of the participants related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The semi-structured interviews were all conducted virtually with the Microsoft Teams web conferencing platform. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai following the established protocols from the previous chapter and the approval of Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A). After the transcription was produced by the Otter.ai transcription services, I reviewed each transcript in conjunction with the audio-recorded interview to verify accuracy and make any necessary corrections. The transcripts were then forwarded to the participants for member-checking and clarification, if appropriate. Reflexive memo journaling was conducted throughout the entire data collection and analysis process to document decisions made, themes developed, and emergence of theory related to the study.

Initial Coding

After reviewing the interview transcripts for accuracy, I performed initial coding on the open-ended questionnaires and the semi-structured interview transcripts using in vivo coding. In vivo coding uses the participant's own words to code specific passages (Rogers, 2018). This approach to the initial coding places significance on the perspectives of the participants and allows for the researcher to make meaning of the data in the participant's own words (Charmaz, 2017; Rogers, 2018). The initial coding of the data resulted in 169 codes. Upon completing the initial coding of the open-ended questionnaires and the semi-structured interview transcripts, I grouped codes of similar meanings into 16 categories.

Focused Coding

Focused coding was used as the secondary coding method to further refine the initial codes and categories into prevailing themes. The open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interview questions were re-coded through the lens of the initial categories as a focused coding method and to refine the data into themes that can be used to better inform the research questions. This process provided validity and trustworthiness to the initial categories and resulted in the refinement of these categories into an emergent theory.

Theoretical Coding

After the iterative process of coding and recoding categories into themes, the final cycle of coding used was theoretical coding. Through this process, the major categories of data were refined into one or more core categories that are structured in a way to identify an emerging theory (Charmaz, 2017; Rogers, 2018). The core categories use the analysis of the collected data to construct a theory that informs the research questions.

Themes

Throughout the data collection and analysis process, themes emerged rapidly. Table 4 lists the primary themes that emerged from the data analysis and certain related codes, or sub-themes, with high significance to the study.

Table 4

Themes and related codes

Themes	Related Codes
Unprecedented	Fear of the unknown The perfect storm Sham
Job to Do	
Family Impact	
Negative Impact	Masking

Positive Impact	Ruined an entire generation of police officers Staffing Uncertainty
Leadership Characteristics	Call management Modified assignments Morale boost Showed their true colors Traditional Leadership Servant Leadership

Unprecedented

The research questions for this study and the supporting literature review are predicated on the idea that the COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented global event impacting law enforcement in a unique way. To validate this supposition, it was imperative to understand the participant's perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic in relationship to policing and critical incidents experienced throughout their career. Across all participants, the *unprecedented* impacts of the global pandemic were a consistent theme throughout their responses, though there may have been individualized perceptions of that impact. The perspectives of the participants' expressed the theme of *unprecedented* in various ways, but generally defined the concept as being a period in their careers that was unlike anything they had ever experienced. The length of time associated with the COVID-19 pandemic was often an explanation given when addressing the pandemic. For example, participant #3 described the COVID-19 pandemic as a "particularly long threat...that you couldn't see or combat effectively." Participant #2 categorized the pandemic as "a longer-term stress...that could not easily be solved by an arrest."

Unprecedented was identified early as a underlying theme in this study. The participants were asked to describe their general feelings about the COVID-19 pandemic, and while each one

expressed their individual perspectives, they all described a similar belief that the timeframe of the COVID-19 pandemic was unlike anything they had ever experienced. Each participant recalled specific periods or experiences during the pandemic that categorized this long-term incident as unique and not comparable to experiences from their past. The theme of *unprecedented* was subsequently divided into the related codes or sub-themes of *fear of the unknown*, *the perfect storm*, and *sham*.

Fear of the unknown. The sub-theme of the *fear of the unknown* was defined through the participants' responses to the interviews and open-ended questionnaire as being concerned or stressed about the potential physical effects of the disease; who was a carrier; and how best to prevent contracting the disease while still completing their required tasks as police officers and detectives. The sub-theme of the *fear of the unknown* came through the data early in the collection process with the participants' answers to the open-ended questionnaire question seven. This question asked the participants "How do you compare the COVID-19 pandemic to other emergencies you deal with in your career related to your well-being?" Subsequently and as part of the semi-structured interview, each participant was asked to provide their general thoughts on the COVID-19 pandemic. As the perspectives of the participants came were expressed, the phrase "*fear of the unknown*" was used by several when speaking about the COVID-19 pandemic. These expressions revolved around the experiences of the participants related to how the novel pandemic impacted their lives; the responses of national, state, and local leaders to the pandemic; and how the pandemic and the responses to it changed policing, if only temporarily.

Due to the longevity of the pandemic, the participants expressed evolving experiences and perspectives related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the responses related to the *fear of the unknown* sub-theme focused on the early stages of the pandemic and the lack of certainty that

revolved around how to address the disease, how it is transmitted, and how to protect oneself.

Participant #4 was one of the first participants to directly use the phrase *fear of the unknown* when describing the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. He was referring to the initial thoughts he had in the early stages of the pandemic and how he was trying to process what was happening in the world when he stated, “there was a little bit of a fear of the unknown to it.”

Participant #7 echoed this concept as he was discussing his thoughts on the disease, treatment, and prevention when he stated, “early on in things there were a lot of unknowns.” P7 further expressed his frustration with the lack of consistent information coming from the medical experts when he stated:

One only has to look at the responses locally, nationally, and globally to get a sense of that. There was both misinformation and disinformation coming in and going out in terms of ‘No, a mask isn’t needed.’ ‘Yes, mask is needed.’ ‘A cloth mask works just fine.’ And then ultimately, here we are three years later, and really none of that necessarily was the best advice.

Participant #5 offered a similar perspective on the *fear of the unknown* concept by expressing his thoughts on how the pandemic was managed by leaders and experts in the field. He stated, “I look at it as like a flu or the measles or one of the major outbreaks in the past.” P5 went on to state:

And as a human race, we had to respond to it regardless of how it occurred. So, in how we responded to it. I think initially, we just didn’t know exactly what we had and how to respond to it.

He later reiterated his statements of there being a lot of *fear of the unknown* and particularly related to how long the pandemic was going to last. This *fear of the unknown* sub-theme was

echoed by several of the participants related to the pandemic and how governments were responding to the crisis.

Participant #2 expressed a unique experience related to the *fear of the unknown* sub-theme of the main theme of the COVID-19 pandemic being an *unprecedented* event. P2 was a frontline patrol officer for a small university police department in an urban environment. As part of the university's early response to the COVID-19 pandemic, students, faculty, and non-essential staff were sent home. P2 and his fellow university police officers were, therefore, in the unique position of "patrolling an empty campus." As the pandemic continued to unfold, P2 indicated, "There was concern for a little while about the university reducing staff during the pandemic. This is the first time that I have had to deal with that kind of reality." Law enforcement has historically been an area where layoffs are not considered, but in this case, it was a real concern for P2 and his fellow university police officers, even if only for a short period of time. This unexpected perspective was explored in the subsequent participants' interviews and was a perspective echoed by some of the other university police officers, but not to the same intensity. In these other police officers who worked for a larger university, the fear of layoffs was fleeting and within the context of actions taken by their leaders to resolve those fears before they became entrenched.

The perfect storm. The participants' perspectives defined the sub-theme of *the perfect storm* as the balancing of the issues of policing during a global health crisis and dealing with the consequences of choices made by local, state, and federal governments that were attempting to respond to the pandemic, as well as the fallout from several high-profile law enforcement-to-civilian interactions that resulted in the death of individuals in police custody. While the setting of this study was focused on the COVID-19 pandemic, it was difficult, if not impossible to

separate the pandemic from the events surrounding the death of George Floyd in the custody of the Minneapolis Police Department and the subsequent summer of justice protests often referred to by the participants as the “Summer of Love,” “the George Floyd Riots,” or “the 2020 Riots.”

Participant #1’s response to the question comparing the pandemic with other emergencies experienced throughout his career was the first to point this out when he stated, “The longevity and complete unknowns of COVID-19 in addition to the riots of 2020 made for a unique experience.” In asking P1 to further explain his experiences related to the 2020 protests, he coined the phrase “evidently you can’t catch COVID if you’re in a riot” that was echoed by many of the other participants. These perspectives were expressed when discussing how, at the time of the summer 2020 protests, many businesses were shut down, people were getting frustrated by the lack of certainty related to the pandemic, and the opportunity to express their frustrations related to several high-profile police related deaths of black suspects in custody.

Participant # 2 expressed the first mention of the *perfect storm* sub-theme in his interview when asked about COVID-19 and the riots when he said:

The pandemic and then the George Floyd protests, that was just the perfect storm. Where you have these two major events occurring at the same time. You have...millions of workers in the United States being told to stay home. And then you see on the news, all of this news about Minneapolis and George Floyd and that whole mess. And basically, your entire workforce is at home, and they see this and they’re like, we need to do something about it and they do. It was just the perfect storm.

Participant #3 effectively tied the COVID-19 and George Floyd riots to police officer well-being when he stated:

...It was just a bad, bad combination of grinding illness and then you had this kind of grinding hatred and discontent towards the police where you felt like you were the bad guy. No matter what you did, you're gonna be in trouble...

Participant #5 echoed the *perfect storm* concept by calling this period of pandemic and riots a "compilation of hysteria" and expressed "just none of it made sense."

Sham. The perspectives provided by a majority of the participants reflected a recognition that the COVID-19 pandemic was a significant health crisis that warranted some type of intervention. By contrast, participant #11's perspectives on the COVID-19 pandemic were vitriol from the start. P11's response to the open-ended questionnaire question #5 demonstrated these feelings and introduced the sub-theme coded, *sham*, when she stated:

I believe that COVID was the biggest sham ever. Concocted by Russia and released by China to sway the election and prevent Donald Trump from being President again. I really did not change my life very much as a result of COVID.

P11's perspectives on the COVID-19 pandemic were probed further as part of the interview questions. In her clarification, P11 emphasized that she was "not a conspiracy theorist" as the foundation for her perspectives. Her responses to the general thoughts about the pandemic were presented as a person with skepticism towards the information being provided to citizens regarding the global pandemic and the government's responses to it. P11 further clarified her position when she stated, "And I thought it was a complete sham that our entire country got shut down for something like that. I thought it was very much there were a lot of ulterior motives for the pandemic, I guess."

As the data from the open-ended questionnaires and the interviews were analyzed, perspectives from other participants refined the definition of the sub-theme *sham*, defining it as

the belief that local, state, and federal leaders were overreaching in their attempts to quell the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic by shuttering businesses, limiting gatherings such as parties and church attendance, and expecting law enforcement to enforce these policies but then not supporting police actions in response to the riots, illegal gatherings, and damage to property. As they discussed the pandemic and their individual experiences during this time, other participants began to express this perspective of the pandemic and governmental responses to the pandemic as a *sham*. Participant #1 expressed a perspective about the pandemic similar to P11's when he stated, "I think the national policy was more political than related to health." While P1's perspectives about the global pandemic were not as strongly presented as P11's, he did "think, we as a society, freaked out a lot."

Participant #6 further echoed the *sham* sub-theme when discussing the COVID-19 pandemic and the perception of overreach when he stated, "the response may have been overblown." P6 went on further to express the frustration with conflicting messaging regarding masking requirements when he stated, "there was both misinformation and disinformation coming in and going out in terms of mask wearing and whether it works." Participant #9 continued the *sham* sub-theme in his statements on the length of time that it took "for society to return to normal." P9 described his evolving thoughts on government responses to the pandemic when he stated, "in the beginning it made sense, then it became an annoyance. Finally, after like a year and a half, why are we not moving on?"

Job To Do

One prevalent theme that emerged from the analysis of the participant responses to the interviews was the concept that the police, no matter the circumstances or leadership decisions, have a *job to do*. As noted throughout the introduction and literature review of this research

project, the mission of law enforcement organizations is to provide public safety and law enforcement services for the citizens and visitors of their respective communities. The perspectives presented by the participants defined this theme as a recognition that, despite the potential dangers associated with the coronavirus disease, police officers still have a responsibility to carry out the missions of their organization. This includes answering calls for service, investigating crimes, and making arrests. Generally, the perspectives of the participants identified the global pandemic and the decisions made by law enforcement leaders in response to COVID-19 as another element impacting how they accomplished their jobs in some way, but not something that fundamentally changed the agency's mission.

Specifically, participant #12 expressed the theme of having a job to do when he stated, "In cases of emergency, COVID-19 infection status was an afterthought for myself. My priority was always to secure the scene and render it safe. Everything else was and remains secondary." Participant #10 echoed this perspective when he stated, "we knew we still had to do our job, as first response and without delay, you know, during priority events."

This concept of having a *job to do* no matter what the issues of COVID-19 or the decisions made by law enforcement leaders repeated across multiple interview questions and participants. Participant #5, when asked how the pandemic changed the way he did his job, stated "For me personally, no, it didn't change." Participant #3 reinforced this thought on the same question by saying "so the day-to-day functioning of my job, I don't think it really changed anything." Participant #1, when asked how the unknown COVID-19 status of his coworkers and citizen interactions impacted him stated, "I mean, the reality of it is nothing really changed for us." Participant #2, when asked about the process leaders used to make decisions related to the COVID-19 pandemic stated, "once the decision is made, you just have to deal with it from

there.” Throughout nearly all of the interviews, some level of the *job to do* sub-theme was restated by the participants, indicating the importance that the participants felt towards the mission of their organizations.

Family Impact

As the analysis of the interviews provided by the participants came into focus, the single theme that repeated the most often across the data and stimulated the most emotional response from the participants was the *family impact* of the pandemic, which included the decisions police leaders made in response to COVID-19. The *family impact* theme was defined by the perspectives of the participants as those elements of the COVID-19 pandemic that cause an increase in stress or concern about the safety of the participants’ families. These perspectives range from the participants’ potential exposure to the coronavirus disease to the decisions that leaders made in response to the pandemic that impacted the participants’ families. The concerns for how the pandemic was impacting police officers’ families cut across all position classifications, age ranges, gender, education levels, and organizational types.

Similar to most of the study respondents, participant #8 recalled considerable stress related to the potential of bringing the coronavirus disease home to his loved ones. When discussing the pandemic, P8 recounted a conversation with one of his supervisors where he asked “What happens if I get it? Am I going to bring that home to my family? ... Basically, I got zero response.” Participant #6 further expressed this concern when he stated, “I’m not afraid about me dying. Bringing it home to my kids or my wife was my main fear.”

Participant #10, a first-line police supervisor in a rural community, expressed a similar concern as P8 and P6 when he stated “It’s definitely something I did not want to catch or didn’t want any of my family or certainly any of my co-workers or anyone I supervise to actually get ill

or have negative effects by it.” The stress of potentially bringing home the coronavirus to a family member was heightened for P10 and his personnel when an officer that he supervised had a family member who died due to complications from COVID-19. When recounting this, P10 stated, “So there was definitely some stress. Palpable stress, I think, that was added on.”

Participant #7 personalized the stress and concern surrounding the *family impacts* theme of being a police officer during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to some family members who passed away during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, P7 was especially concerned about bringing coronavirus home to his son. Specifically, P7 expressed, “I have a son who has a compromised immune system or possible comorbidity when it comes to any sort of respiratory illness. And given that COVID-19 does affect the respiratory system, it was a slightly greater concern.” Participant #5 recounted a similar concern for his family’s well-being during the early stages of the pandemic due to his role as a police officer and being exposed to potentially ill persons. P5’s “family spend most of the summer of 2020 in the Outer Banks safe from rioting and COVID exposure that I may or may not bring home.”

Negative Impact

Moving out of the framework of the research and the general perspectives of the study participants towards the global pandemic, the data analysis provided several key themes that answer the research questions and identify the emerging theory that explains how police leaders’ decisions impacted the well-being of their officers. The primary theme that emerged from this analysis was the *negative impact* of decisions on police officer well-being. The perspectives of the participants defined the theme of *negative impact* as those decisions, or absence of decisions, that impacted their well-being in an unpleasant or stressful manner. This theme of *negative impact* included decisions by police leaders that did not make sense to the officers; decisions that

impacted or potentially impacted their ability to do their jobs; decisions that potentially impacted their families; and decisions that were perceived as ambiguous, incomplete, or not consistent with the best practices and recommendations. Participant # 1 framed the *negative impact* theme when he stated, “One could argue there were probably more negative than there were positive.” He further clarified this statement by placing the *negative impact* largely on the decisions made by leaders when he stated, “The negatives are more associated with the ignorance of people in decision making locations and the department.”

While all of the participants expressed some *negative impact* of the decisions of police leaders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Participant #3 was expressive of his frustrations with his law enforcement leaders lack of foresight into the needs of his agency’s patrol units.

Specifically, P3 stated:

Some of the policy things I thought were negative was probably some lack of policies. Our Criminal Investigation Section and Organized Crime, every other section, the division went on ‘work from home,’ which was basically go do nothing and still get paid. While patrol stuck out there and, you know, just kept knocking it out, you know, for two plus years. That was detrimental to morale for the people on the road. They felt like they were stuck on the island by themselves.

Participant #4 further supported this concept of *negative impact* due to lack of policies for his department when he stated, “I don’t think that any policies were put in place that would benefit the officers in any way.”

Several of the participants attempted to further explain how the *negative impact* of law enforcement leaders made them feel during this period of their careers. Participant #1 expressed his frustration with decisions made in reference to the impact on his routine job duties when he

stated, “Everything just runs ten times slower when you need it.” Participant #11, alternatively, expressed the *negative impact* of leader decisions on her overall well-being through an analogy, “I feel like a hamster in the ocean that really can’t swim. And I’m just like, picture my little hands, like paddling as fast as I can. I mean, some days are great. Some days are a real struggle.” Participant #8’s expression of the *negative impact* theme included his general feelings about the pandemic period when he stated, “2020 to 2021 was a pretty, pretty dark period of my life. I secluded myself away from my family for a long while.”

Masking. During the analysis of the *negative impact* theme, one prevalent sub-theme began to emerge in the data. *Masking* within this context was defined as the decision made to require the wearing of masks in certain situations and how that decision was inconsistently enforced in the various law enforcement scenarios. While each agency provided its specific rules for when and what kind of masks had to be worn, nearly all the participants expressed some level of frustration with the mandates surrounding *masking*. Participant #5’s participation in the research and data gathering process could be referred to as largely positive and understanding of the decisions made by his law enforcement leaders during the pandemic. However, the primary *negative impact* of decisions made by his agency’s leaders was surrounding the mandated *masking*. P5 expressed his position on the inconsistency surrounding *masking* when he stated, “The most frustrating thing was to always wear the mask no matter what.” P5 further expressed his frustration with the mask policy and its application within the same building when he stated, “If you don’t have to wear it upstairs, why are we wearing it down here?”

Similarly, participant #1 expressed his frustration over the *masking* mandates in his agency and the lack of “common sense” application of the policy. P1 vented, “They came out with silly rules, like you had to wear your mask in your office. Well, like we all have our own

office. So, what sense does that make? It just made it uncomfortable to work sometimes.”

Participant #11 articulated a comparable irritation, “I was peeved when, you know, the mask mandate started and all of that stuff...The mask wearing of course, that was just like insane. We were socially distanced. We were in our own offices.”

Not all the law enforcement organizations mandated a strict adherence to always *masking* according to the participants of this study. However, even in these agencies, the participants expressed annoyances regarding *masking*. Participant #3 spoke on the topic of *masking* and that his agency “had a division policy to wear masks all the time, except for when we were by ourselves.” However, P3 provided an anecdote of his experiences with *masking* when he stated, “You’d get in a tussle with somebody, your mask is getting yanked off of you and everything else.” This example showed the limited effectiveness of masks worn by police officers in the performance of some of their required duties. P3 further discussed the *masking* hinderances in the performance of duties and the adoption of mask wearing by criminal elements who “did seem to kind of take to it because it helped them hide their identity a lot.” Participant #7 also complained of the limitations to police interactions with suspects that was caused by the *masking* mandates when he stated, “It makes reading people’s faces a little bit more difficult. I feel like face-to-face contact, there’s a lot of benefits to that.” P7’s opinion of the required mask wearing during the COVID-19 pandemic was further characterized by his statement, “I think everybody everywhere probably went a little overboard with the masking thing.”

Participant #10’s perspective of the *masking* mandates was somewhat unique in that his perspectives were shaped by the feedback he received from his subordinates. Specifically, P10 recalled:

When there were mandates regarding wearing masks, there were some individuals that worked here that were somewhat defiant on that element. Mandates were put in place with hospitals for our ECOs (*emergency custody orders*) and TDOs (*temporary detention orders*) ... Whatever their rulings are, we're going to adhere to and have that expectation, but there were a handful of individuals that were somewhat defiant on that aspect.

(Abbreviation definitions added for clarity by the researcher)

While some of the officers in P10's agency were resistant, at times, to the mask mandates, participant #8 felt the resistance to the *masking* mandates from his organization's leadership. P8 felt frustration at what he described as inconsistent messaging from the police chief when he stated, "We had these really great masks. He didn't want us to wear them because he thought it would alarm people." No matter the agency's position on the adoption of *masking* mandates, the sub-theme of *masking* was viewed negatively by the participating research subjects.

Ruined an entire generation of police officers. As many law enforcement leaders attempted to react to the COVID-19 pandemic, changes were often made to the way police officers went about doing their routine jobs. Many of the participants in this study reported their organizations made decisions and recommendations for police officers to become less proactive in their enforcement efforts to reduce unnecessary exposure to the coronavirus. These decisions were viewed, by some of the participants, as having a *negative impact* on the police officers' ability to do their jobs, as well as a *negative impact* on the future of policing. This idea resulted in the sub-theme referred to as *ruined an entire generation of police officers*. Participant #3 was the first study participant to coin the sub-theme *ruined an entire generation of police officers* in his discussion on the topic, where he stated:

So literally instead of being proactive, we stopped being proactive. Stopped stopping cars. Stopped doing anything that didn't come from a radio call. And I think that ruined an entire generation of police officers. Because now that we're getting out of it, it is like, I mean, you could stand behind them with a flame thrower and a bull whip, and you're not going to get them to go stop cars and stuff anymore. It drastically changed the face of police work in a negative direction. I think that had a profound impact on this current generation of police officers and I'm not sure how we're going to get it back.

As a first-line supervisor, P3 expressed his frustration with the lack of planning his leaders displayed in getting police officers back to work and being proactive in their duties as the pandemic wound down to a more manageable risk.

Participant #8, a uniformed police officer, was similarly concerned with the lack of proactivity during the COVID-19 pandemic. "We were more reactionary at the beginning" was the initial comment from P8 when this topic was discussed. He further stated, "It was a very hands-off approach is what they wanted us to do with everyone. Like they didn't want us to stop anybody for literally anything unless it was life or death at first." P8's concern about the lack of proactivity during the pandemic bled over into his agency's initial responses to the George Floyd protests and riots, which was reportedly the same as the response to COVID-19. However, as the protests became more violent and destructive, the agency, according to P8, shifted to a more proactive response:

I think it should have been done a lot faster. I think we would have had less incidents, had we really been allowed to just do our jobs. They didn't want us to get hands on with people. But at some point, we had no choice. We had to do that in order to not only preserve some of the areas but also preserve life, including our own lives.

Participant #11's responses categorized in this sub-theme were from her perspective and experiences as a detective and as an internal affairs investigator at the beginning of the pandemic. In her response, P11 was concerned about the *negative impact* of the decisions that her agency leaders had on her ability to do her job, as well as the long-term implications of those decision. When asked about the *negative impact* of leader decisions, P11 stated:

They didn't want us doing any interviews in our office because, I guess, some of the supervision was worried about bringing officers who have been out on the street and exposed to more than we had, back to the office. They didn't want us bringing them in. So, we were doing all of our interviews for IA cases over the phone, which was ludicrous.

P11's concerns surrounding her inability to conduct in-person interviews at her office was due to the potential compromise of her ability to effectively investigate criminal and administrative cases, which could impact the effectiveness of the agency in the future.

Staffing. As the participants explored and expressed their perspectives of the *negative impact* of their agency leaders' decisions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the sub-theme of *staffing* emerged, particularly for those participants in the uniformed police officer and uniformed first-line supervisor roles. Participant #2, a uniformed police officer on an urban university campus, recalled he and his shift mates being tasked by their agency leaders to assist school health monitors with periodically checking on students who were in a quarantine location on campus and were not responsive to the health monitors' phone calls. These were students who were unable to return to their families and were either COVID-19 positive or had a close exposure and were being quarantined in specific student housing. Being part of a campus police

department, P2 was concerned about the impact of his or his shift mates being exposed or contracting COVID-19 during one of these student checks. He stated:

And essentially you could, with two checks that an officer gets or has some type of contact and comes down with COVID; you're taking out an entire shift. If its two officers off of the same shift, that's it. That shift is done.

P2 went on to express his concerns, not only for dealing with the virus, but the agency's ability to respond to emergency calls for service with depleted staffing. The potential reduction in staffing also had potential *family impact* due to the need for extended hours and shifts to cover for sick or quarantined coworkers.

Participant #3 expressed similar concerns with regards to the potential to have one or more officers exposed to the coronavirus and the impacts of losing a shift of officers to quarantine. However, as part of a larger law enforcement organization in the region, P3 expressed greater concerns with his agency leaders' lack of preparation to compensate for these potential losses of *staffing*. Earlier in the discussion, P3 expressed his frustration with investigative personnel being sent home to telecommute while the uniformed patrol officers continued to answer calls for service. As he explored the potential for *staffing* losses due to the pandemic, he stated, "There was no contingency by the division to get these other people that were working from home up to date on stuff. They just never came up with a working policy that was, you know, reasonable and functional." P3 went on to further explain that working in patrol, or "the road," has "become a specialization of its own." Personnel who have been conducting criminal investigations as detectives for a number of years may not be familiar with the best practices and changes to how patrol officers respond to emergency calls for service since they have left the uniformed police role. In these situations, according to P3, the investigative officers

and detectives need remedial training to bring them up-to-speed on the latest requirements of uniformed policing.

Uncertainty. The final sub-theme to the *negative impact* theme focused on the *uncertainty* surrounding the decisions made by law enforcement leaders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. *Uncertainty* emerged as a significant impact on many of the participants' well-being and was defined as a lack of clarity and trust in the decisions of agency leaders. As discussed earlier, the participants recognized that the COVID-19 pandemic was unlike anything law enforcement agencies or leaders had experienced. However, the *uncertainty* sub-theme developed throughout the discussions with the participants, included various aspects of leader decisions, and focused on the participants' perspectives of minimal confidence in their leaders' decisions. As an example, participant #11 demonstrated this lack of confidence in her agency leaders' ability to deal with the pandemic when she stated, "And there was no real direction. No real guidance. Everybody was just kind of flying by the seat of their pants. Even the people in charge didn't understand the policies." P11's comments in this instance were generalizations of her leaders when asked about her feelings about their decisions throughout the pandemic.

Participant #1 echoed this *uncertainty* in a discussion on the policies surrounding contracting or being exposed to the coronavirus. P1 demonstrated this inconsistency in his leaders' decisions and application of those decisions when he stated, "And you know, sometimes it was oh, you're gone for two weeks. And sometimes it was well, you're, you know, lock yourself in your office or wear a mask." The inconsistent application of policies in response to the pandemic led to, according to P1, officers failing to report illness and exposures, which risked additional law enforcement personnel contracting the disease.

Uncertainty was further expressed by the participants related to the COVID-19 vaccine, its efficacy, and mandates of police officers to receive the vaccine. Participant #2 expressed his concerns about his agency's leaders discussing requirements for police officers to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, when he stated, "There was a whole bunch of conversations and stuff about the vaccine. Is it mandatory? And what happens if you don't take it? What happens if you do?" Ultimately, P2 was able to alleviate his concerns by speaking with his personal physician and made his vaccine decision based on his physician's guidance. However, Participant #11 expressed her frustrations with her agency's requirements to be vaccinated and the toll that it took on her during this time when she stated:

We were all mandated to get the vaccines. And I was, you know, I never would have gotten it but for work telling us we had to. I remember going to the location and getting the first injection. We had to sit in our car outside and wait in case we had an allergic reaction. And I called my husband crying and I said, 'I am so not okay with this.' I never would have done it on my own. But, you know, we had to do it.

The stress of being mandated by the law enforcement organization to be injected with a vaccine that she would have never considered taking on her own significantly impacted P11's psychological well-being and was unmistakable during the interviews. It was particularly impactful because P11 felt there was no other option than to take the vaccine or potentially lose her job.

The stress associated with *uncertainty* as demonstrated by these participants during their recollection of their lived experiences was palpable during the discussions. Of all of the *negative impact* of leader decisions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, *uncertainty* evoked the most visceral emotions and perspectives from the participants that did not always come across in the

exact words they used but more in how they said the words. For some participants, it was frustration in the *uncertainty* of decisions made by leaders, while in others it was a fear of the consequences of those decisions that was experienced by the participants. Participant #1 was able, however, to sum up the general feeling of the participants when he stated, “There was that general stress of not knowing. This added stress and uncertainty on top of an already stressful and uncertain job was difficult.”

Positive Impact

While not as prevalent in the data analysis as the *negative impact* theme, *positive impact* was a theme that came through as the discussion on law enforcement leader decisions was explored by the participants. *Positive impact* was defined as those decisions made by leaders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic that resulted positive feelings perceived by the participants. This theme includes several areas of police officer well-being impacted by law enforcement leader decisions. As an example, participant #2 discussed his agency leaders’ approach to monitoring personnel health during the pandemic as a *positive impact* to his well-being. Specifically, this approach “was mostly concerned with doing a daily check sheet. You know, ‘have you felt sick? Do you have a sore throat? What is your temperature?’” Additionally, P2 had positive feedback on his organization’s capability to test personnel that had been exposed to the coronavirus at no cost to the employee.

Participant #10 echoed this theme of *positive impact* to police officer well-being related to his agency’s leadership decisions. Specifically, P10 expressed his appreciation for his agency’s approach to handling absences caused by COVID-19 exposure, quarantine, and illness and that the absence leave “was not passed onto the deputy themselves to alleviate any stress about losing their own personal time off hours.” In these cases, police officers at P10’s

organization were able to take off from work to recover from their exposure and illness while still retaining their personal and sick leave balances for future use. Similarly, Participant #8's expressed his appreciation and confidence in his leadership's decision-making related to contact tracing. Specifically, P8 noted a positive policy change where "there was a process that you had to go through in order to notify people and they would do backtracking to see kind of who else you've been around so they can inform them." Both P10 and P8's *positive impact* experiences were associated with their agency's proactive response to COVID-19 illnesses that resulted in feelings of reduced stress for police officers of these organizations.

The *positive impact* theme was further expressed through participant #1's experiences with his law enforcement organization. In particular, P1 felt his agency's decision to expand "the ability for people, especially ones with some comorbidities, to remote work was a positive." These actions were primarily focused on the health and wellness concerns of police officers and support staff. This perspective was also supported by other participants' experiences, such as Participant #5 who described his agency's pandemic policy changes as "more for our personal safety" and that they "were overly cautious." Especially in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, these cautious and safety minded approaches were well received by many of the participants of this study.

Call management. As the *positive impact* theme developed, a smaller sub-theme of *call management* emerged in the data of a few of the uniformed patrol officers and supervisors. Specifically, Participant #3 called out this sub-theme in his discussion on actions taken by his agency's leadership that he viewed as having a *positive impact* on the well-being of himself and his fellow police officers. P3 described his agency's use of call management officers who were police officers that were not able to work in patrol operations due to injuries or other

circumstances that were “put in Communications” and would address calls for service that were able to be conducted over the telephone to limit face-to-face interactions. Participant #10’s experience was similar, in that:

A lot of routine events ... in law enforcement ... reports we might normally take in person; we changed our process in that a little bit. If we didn’t have to make personal contact, we were directed to try and handle calls by phone.

Reducing the in-person requirements of answering certain minor calls for service by police officers and allowing for telephone calls to address these issues was well received by the participants who experienced this approach.

Another approach that fell into the *call management* sub-theme was to limit law enforcement involvement in calls for service that were not necessarily police matters. Participant #3 described several types of civil or regulatory type calls, such as unsightly lawn concerns, that his agency historically would send a patrol officer to discuss with the complainant but that were ultimately not police matters. During the initial period of the COVID-19 pandemic, P3’s agency took the stance that “We would also just deny that we were going to respond to certain things that didn’t have anything to do with the police.” P3 and his coworkers described this approach as “a very, very positive thing...that really gave you kind of like a sign of relief amongst all the turmoil you were dealing with COVID.” Unfortunately, according to P3, this approach was short lived, and his agency has since returned to sending police officers to these types of calls he categorized as not police matters.

Modified assignments. Another key sub-theme that fell under the broader *positive impact* theme was *modified assignments*. The perspectives presented under this sub-theme were focused on decisions that were made by the organizational leaders that changed certain routine

tasks or processes. The results of these changes were perceived by the respondents as having a *positive impact* on the overall well-being of police officers. For example, participant #10 cited his organization's change in having uniformed patrol units initiate their shifts with in-person briefings as the agency's headquarters. P10 recalled

We would meet kind of one day outside in a big open circle off site. Kind of just make sure that we kept all of our guys abreast of any of the trends or patterns of the crimes that were going on.

Additionally, P10 stated "We only came into the sheriff's office itself if we absolutely had to." With these decisions, according to P10, the agency's leadership limited the potential COVID-19 exposure and allowed the frontline patrol personnel to limit trips to the office to only those critically necessary.

Similarly, participant #7 recalled "an innovative and unique approach by leadership here in order to preserve jobs." In this instance, P7 stated some frontline police officers "had assignments, basically just wiping down tables at certain locations throughout the hospital on a rotating schedule." P7 further recalled, "the first couple of hours of my shift each day for six weeks were to assist in taking temperatures and asking screening questions of people entering the hospital." With these decisions, P7's leadership was able to assuage any early concerns regarding potential layoffs during the pandemic through these *modified assignments*.

Morale boost. The last sub-theme of the broader *positive impact* theme was that of *morale boost*. With this sub-theme, the participants describe how these positive changes during COVID-19 impacted their overall well-being. For participant #3, his leadership's decisions to no longer send personnel to calls for service that were not directly police related "was at least a bright spot." With these decisions, he and his fellow police officers knew they "did not have to

go deal with that idiocy anymore.” Participant #10 echoed these thoughts when discussing his organization’s modifications of assignments and relaxing some of the minor agency regulations and expectations. With the relaxing of these internal focuses, P10 reflected, “And as odd as it sounds, it was some bit of morale boost among patrol because there was not like a very direct thumb on your neck, hands on approach.” The participants who recalled *positive impacts* of their leaders’ decisions during COVID-19 often described the impact in terms of the boosting of their morale during this stressful period.

Leadership Characteristics

As the participants’ responses to the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview were analyzed for themes, I categorized their responses into the theme of *leadership characteristics* which emerged as a general undertone to their discussions. In these conversations, the participants perspectives on the way in which the agency leaders made their decisions, communicated decisions to personnel, and their openness to feedback presented noteworthy results for exploration. The participants often expressed strong opinions about the *leadership characteristics* of their agency directors during the pandemic. These perspectives seemed to correlate to the participants perspectives on *positive* and *negative impacts* of the decisions made by leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant #1, for example, when discussing his perspectives of the decision-making process in his organization stated, “If I’m honest, it was jacked up.” Participant #2, alternatively, expressed his perspectives of the decision-making process of his leaders by stating, “We felt supported in some areas. We didn’t feel supported in others. Honestly with the current administration in the police department, that’s kind of how it’s been.”

Analysis of the participants' perspectives of the decision-making process of their respective agency leaders provided rich details and insights that informed this study. While exploring the broader theme of *leadership characteristic*, sub-themes emerged and provided greater context to these perspectives. The sub-themes of *showed their true colors*, *traditional leadership*, and *Servant Leadership* emerged as the most informative to this research project. The next paragraphs explore each of these concepts from the perspectives of the participants.

Showed their true colors. The first prevailing sub-theme of the broader *leadership characteristics* theme was that during the pandemic, leaders *showed their true colors*. While the COVID-19 pandemic provided law enforcement leaders with new challenges and opportunities, the participants of the study were all in agreement that the health crisis merely magnified the pre-existing characteristics of their organizational leaders. Participant #12 described this concept when he stated, "if you had good leaders, you saw that early on during the pandemic." Participant #1 echoed this perspective when he stated, "I don't think that COVID-19 made somebody a good leader or made somebody a bad leader. It was just one of those extreme events that showed their true colors."

When generally asked about the leadership and decision-making characteristics of her agency leaders, participant #11 characterized it as "the blind leading the blind." When further pressed on the topic, P11 felt these sentiments about the organizational leaders existed prior to the pandemic. Participant #3 felt his agency leaders' decision-making approach was often "out of touch" and "not inclusive" of input from frontline workers and first-line supervisors. He, too, agreed that this approach existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and continued to the time of the interview.

Traditional Leadership. *Traditional leadership* became another sub-theme that emerged as the analysis of the broader *leadership characteristic* occurred. In this context, the participants' responses and discussions were categorized throughout the study through the lens of the traditional police leadership style that was described in the literature review. The participants described the decision-making process as closed with little or no avenue for feedback. Participant #6 recalled his organization's decision-making process as "not open to feedback from those carrying out the decisions" made by the leaders. Participant #8 expressed his frustrations with the closed decision-making of his organization's leaders when he stated, "I thought as though our opinions didn't really matter that much. It was kind of a 'do it our way or the highway' kind of deal." P8 drew a conclusion between this approach to decision-making and an uptick in police officer vacancies when he stated, "this is probably what caused a lot of officers to leave. We lost a decent amount of officers during COVID."

Participant #4 discussed the *traditional leadership* sub-theme in context of decision-making and the communication of those decisions to the members of the organization. Specifically, P4 stated, "during the COVID time..., there was little to no communication. And that was one of the big issues." P4 recalled several instances where he and his coworkers would learn of decisions and policies through media releases and news reports. P4 encapsulated the issue and impact of the *traditional leadership* concept by saying, "When you're working in a stressful job, any additional stress imposed by the employer because they're just doing a very poor job is not great."

Participants #3 and #10, both first-line supervisors in patrol units, discussed the closed nature of their agency leaders' decision-making process in their interviews. P10 stated, "Even as a first-line supervisor, I'm not usually directly involved in the command staff meetings." P10

expressed this perspective on not being involved in leadership meetings in a way that came across as expected and not unusual for his role. Conversely, P3 expressed a perspective of desiring to be involved in the decision-making process due to his proximity to the actions necessary to carry out those decisions. Specifically, P3 stated, “the problem is they never reached down to the level of sergeants and lieutenants, the people that actually run the stuff every single day and know how it works.”

It is important to note that not all the participants’ perspectives correlating to the *traditional leadership* sub-theme were negative. The *traditional leadership* sub-theme is merely a categorization of the actions and decisions made by law enforcement leaders from the perspective of the study participants that were consistent with the traditional police leadership style. For example, participant #5 provided positive feedback regarding the decisions made by his agency leaders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. P5 did not, however, feel there was a process for leaders to receive feedback, at least in the early stages of the pandemic. Specifically, P5 noted, “I was not in the leadership meetings back then during 2020-2021.” He further emphasized, “I didn’t have any issues with the way the process was.” P10 similarly, as reflected above, felt confident in the established process that his agency leaders used to make decisions and which, at times, fell within the sub-theme of *traditional leadership*.

Servant Leadership. Rounding out the primary theme of *leadership characteristics* is the sub-theme of *Servant Leadership*. Through the analysis of the participants’ responses, those discussions that corresponded to the *Servant Leadership* style as previously discussed in the literature review were categorized. The emergence of the *Servant Leadership* sub-theme was not intended to identify *positive* or *negative impacts*, merely those decision-making processes and characteristics that aligned with the *Servant Leadership* style.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a couple of the participants experienced a change in their organization's top leader or leaders that were attributed to circumstances unrelated to the COVID-19 pandemic. This turnover allowed these participants to experience differing leadership styles and approaches. For example, participant #1 described his police chief during the early months of the pandemic as "a person who truly had our best interests at heart and was working within the guidelines as best as he could understand it." Participant #4 echoed this experience when discussing the current police chief versus the previous chief when he stated, "we have someone now that communicates with us regularly." These perspectives of P1 and P4 align with the *Servant Leadership* characteristics of stewardship, healing, and building community.

As the pandemic began taking shape as a long-term crisis that law enforcement organizations were having to respond to, some organizations made changes to their processes to allow for feedback opportunities. Specifically, participant #10 recalled his organizational leaders depending heavily on the expertise of their "lieutenant of personnel to coordinate with the county to gather pandemic response information." P10 further explained that these steps were taken because the leaders "were concerned for our safety and had our best interests in mind." In these instances, the leaders of these organizations utilized active listening and empathy characteristics of *Servant Leadership* to lead their agencies through the pandemic.

Finally, some of the decisions made by law enforcement leaders in the participants' agencies were perceived to be made to reduce unnecessary stressors during a critical period. As discussed before, the leaders in participant #7's organization made the decision to have some of their employees take temperatures and do wellness checks at building entrances that they had law enforcement responsibilities. P7 recalled these actions as "a wise decision... preserving people's

employment.” This choice is consistent with empathy and healing characteristics of *Servant Leadership*.

Research Question Responses

Two research questions were formulated and identified at the onset of this research study. The focus of the study was set to answer these questions. During the analysis of the data, however, it became vital to the study to establish the validity of the COVID-19 pandemic as a memorable event and to understand how the participants viewed the pandemic. Through that framework analysis, two themes were developed from the data: *unprecedented* and *job to do*. Of those themes, three sub-themes were identified to inform *unprecedented*: *fear of the unknown*, *the perfect storm*, and *sham*.

RQ1

The first research question for this study asks, “How did police officers perceive the impact of law enforcement leaders’ decision-making on their overall well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic?” The focus of this question is on the participants’ perceptions of the impact of their leaders’ decision-making on their well-being. In the analysis of the study data, three themes were identified that address this research question: *family impact*; *negative impact*; and *positive impact*. Through detailed analysis of the questionnaires and the semi-structured interview transcripts, sub-themes emerged for the main themes of *negative impact* and *positive impact*. The four sub-themes that emerged for *negative impact* were: *masking*; *ruined an entire generation of police officers*; *staffing*; and *uncertainty*. The three sub-themes that emerged for *positive impact* were: *call management*; *modified assignments*; and *morale boost*.

RQ2

The second research question for this study asks, “How did police officers perceive the impact of law enforcement leaders’ leadership style on their overall well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic?” This question was focused on the leaders’ styles, how leaders make decisions, and how those decisions are communicated, to include receiving feedback on decisions, as perceived by the participants. In the analysis of the research data, one main theme was developed: *leadership characteristics*. Through the detailed analysis of the questionnaires and the semi-structured interview questions, three sub-themes emerged to inform the main theme. The three sub-themes that emerged for *leadership characteristics* were: *showed their true colors; traditional leadership*, and *Servant Leadership*.

Theoretical Emergence

The goal of a constructivist grounded theory study is to identify the emergence of a theory that answers and explains the research questions (Chamaz, 2017; Thurlow, 2020; Tie et al., 2019). Due to time and other limitations which will be discussed in Chapter 5, a fully developed and tested theory was unobtainable. However, theoretical emergence was successful in this study and will be explored in Chapter 5. A brief introduction of the theory is appropriate for this section of the study.

Based upon the detailed analysis of the participants’ answers to the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews, the researcher postulates that during long-term crises, law enforcement leaders using an open style of leadership and decision-making, such as Servant Leadership, have a higher probability of impacting the well-being of their frontline police officers and first-line supervisors positively. Conversely, law enforcement leaders using closed leadership and decision-making styles, such as traditional police leadership, have a higher probability of impacting the well-being of frontline police officers and first-line supervisors

negatively. A law enforcement leaders' decision-making, communication, and leadership style has a critical impact on the to the overall well-being of subordinate officers within their organization, as well as the effectiveness of the agency.

Summary

The details in this chapter discussed the analysis of the research data gathered through the qualitative questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews. Additionally, this chapter presented an introduction of the study participants, a detailed discussion of the results of the interactions with those participants, and the development of themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data. Lastly, this chapter introduced the emergence of a theory to answer the research questions. The next chapter will include an exploration of the study findings, further explore the theoretical emergence, discuss the implications for this research, review the study limitations, and present areas for future research exploration.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

This constructivist grounded theory research sought to understand the impact of leadership decisions on the well-being of police officers in different law enforcement organizations throughout the Central Virginia Region during the COVID-19 pandemic. Within the framework of this study, the researcher explored the lived experiences of frontline police officers and first-line supervisors from their perspectives and in their own words to understand how their agency leaders' decisions impacted their overall well-being during the global coronavirus pandemic. Additionally, this research study explored the impact of law enforcement leaders' decision-making processes on their subordinates' well-being from the perspective of frontline officers and first-line supervisors affected by the decisions. Rich, detailed insights from the research participants were gathered using qualitative open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews. The constructivist grounded theory methodology was used to analyze the participants' responses to make meaning of their experiences and develop a theory that addressed the research questions.

Chapter Five provides details for a summary of the research project's findings, followed by a detailed discussion of the findings with relevant literature. Additionally, this chapter discusses the implications of the study results, including theoretical and practical implications of the research as well as recommendations for law enforcement officials and policy makers. Finally, the chapter concludes with the delimitations and limitations of the study, as well as provides recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

This constructivist grounded theory study focused on two research questions that guided the data gathering:

RQ1) How did police officers perceive the impact of law enforcement leaders' decision-making on their overall well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2) How did police officers perceive the impact of law enforcement leaders' leadership style on their overall well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic?

For this study, 12 participants completed a qualitative open-ended questionnaire followed by a semi-structured interview. The participants' semi-structured interview questions were transcribed and analyzed along with the open-ended questionnaire responses through constant comparative analysis and coding to find common themes within the data. The themes were further categorized to answer the research questions of this study. The themes that addressed RQ1 were *family impact, negative impact, and positive impact*. The theme of *negative impact* was further described by the sub-themes of *masking, ruined an entire generation of police officers, staffing, and uncertainty*. The sub-themes of *call management, modified assignments, and morale boost* further illustrated the *positive impact* theme. There was one theme, *leadership characteristics*, that addressed RQ2. This theme was represented by the sub-themes of *showed their true colors, traditional leadership, and Servant Leadership*.

A constructivist grounded theory methodology for data analysis aims to develop a theory that helps explain a study's research questions from the data gathered during the research process (Chamaz, 2017; Thurlow, 2020; Tie et al., 2019). This research project met the main elements of that goal with some limitations and recommendations for future research discussed later in this chapter. Based on the analysis of the data gathered from the qualitative open-ended

questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews, a theory emerged that helped explain this study's research questions. A law enforcement leader's style of leadership and the process they use for decision-making, communication, and availability of feedback on those decisions significantly impact a police officer's overall well-being, particularly during long-term, uncertain crisis incidents. Those leaders who use a leadership and decision-making style that is limited or closed to input or feedback from followers, such as traditional police leadership, have a higher probability of negatively impacting the well-being of their frontline police officers and first-line supervisors. Alternatively, those law enforcement leaders who use a leadership and decision-making style that is more open to follower input and allows for feedback from those impacted by the decisions, such as Servant Leadership, have a higher probability of impacting the well-being of their frontline police officers and first-line supervisors positively.

Discussion

This constructivist grounded theory study was conducted to understand the impact of law enforcement leadership decisions on police officers' well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic and from the perspective of those frontline police officers, detectives, and first-line supervisors who lived this experience. Because of the long-term and unprecedented impacts of the global coronavirus pandemic, the grounded theory approach was chosen to explore this topic. Therefore, no single theory served as the theoretical framework for investigating the research questions. The study was, however, influenced by the Servant Leadership and police officer well-being theories. It is vital to properly situate this research within the framework of other academic research and note where the study is focused. Specifically, this dissertation research is focused on leadership decision-making and the processes that leaders use to make, communicate, and receive feedback.

The participants for this study were purposively selected based on their ability to answer the research questions best. Twelve participants from the Central Virginia Region participated in a qualitative open-ended questionnaire, followed by a semi-structured interview exploring their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic as a police officer, detective, or first-line supervisor. The participants' interviews were transcribed, coded, and categorized to develop themes and sub-themes of the data that addressed the research questions. The themes were then analyzed to determine a theory that emerged from the data to answer the research questions. In the next section, the emerging theory and themes are discussed as they pertain to the empirical and theoretical literature previously addressed in the literature review of this study, as well as exploring the areas of corroboration with the literature.

Empirical Literature

Analysis of the data gathered for this dissertation research project resulted in the emergence of themes, sub-themes, and a preliminary theory that answers the research questions of this study. The theory grounded in the results of the data gathered during this research suggests that a law enforcement leader's decision-making process, communication, and leadership style have a vital impact on the well-being of their subordinate frontline police officers and first-line supervisors, particularly during long-term and highly uncertain events. Leaders who use an open decision-making and communication style that allows for follower input and provides a mechanism for feedback have a higher probability of positively impacting the well-being of police officers. Conversely, leaders who use a closed decision-making and communication style that limits follower input and does not allow for feedback on decisions made have a higher likelihood of negatively impacting the well-being of their police officers.

This theory, that is grounded in the data gathered from the open-ended questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews, finds corroboration with the previously discussed empirical literature on the topic of Servant Leadership. Specifically, Sarver and Miller's (2014) research on police chief leadership styles found that law enforcement leaders with characteristics of openness were more successful in getting followers to go above and beyond the minimum required in the completion of their duties. The theory in this dissertation asserts that Sarver and Miller's results apply to well-being perspectives of police officers related to the decision-making processes of their law enforcement leaders.

Similarly, Russell et al.'s (2018) study on the Servant Leadership agency found that the Servant Leadership agency was committed to the mental and emotional health of their police officers, which corroborates the findings of this dissertation that suggest that law enforcement leaders using an open style of leader decision-making and communication that allows for follower input and feedback has a positive impact on police officers. The difference in this dissertation study and Russell et al.'s findings center around the negative impacts of the closed decision-making and communication style of leadership that is synonymous with the traditional police leadership and limits the ability of followers to provide input and feedback on decisions. Additionally, findings of this dissertation placed greater emphasis on the process of decision-making versus the actual decisions made.

Job to Do

The results of this dissertation research project suggest that the decisions made by law enforcement leaders in response to long-term, uncertain incidents like the COVID-19 pandemic have a minimal impact on a police officer's well-being when compared to the process of making the decisions. The participants in this study overwhelmingly recognized and discussed the theme

of having a *job to do* within the setting of the COVID-19 pandemic and regarding their leaders' decisions in response to the health crisis. This finding is closely aligned with Russell's (2019) exploration of Servant Leadership and the recognition that in emergency crises, police officers will do what is necessary to accomplish the public safety mission.

From the theme of having a *job to do*, the findings suggest that police officers, detectives, and first-line supervisors recognize the mission of their agencies and the responsibilities of their jobs in these long-term, uncertain crises. They acknowledge their chosen careers have dangerous elements that put their physical and mental well-being at risk. They recognize that their leaders are making decisions for the agency's mission. Additionally, police officers, detectives, and first-line supervisors realize the routine occupational hazards to their well-being remain present despite the type of incident they are involved with or the decisions their leaders make in response to those incidents. Participants in this study routinely pointed out they "knew we still had to do our job" despite the circumstances they were placed into by leaders or the incident itself. This recognition corroborates the occupational stressors of routine law enforcement and the stresses of job content, as reviewed in Violanti et al.'s (2017) research.

Saunders et al.'s (2019) research on organizational stressors in law enforcement is corroborated by this study's analysis of the *job to do* theme and the recognition of the importance of leader decision-making process on police officer well-being. As mentioned previously in the data analysis results chapter, the participants often criticized the decision-making process, or at least their lack of visibility into the method used to make decisions, as a primary source of stress. Referred to by one participant as "the ignorance of people in decision-making" positions, the organizational stress produced by an agency's leadership decision-making process proved to be viscerally memorable to police officers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Negative Impact

All the participants in this study recalled aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the decisions made by their organizational leaders as having a *negative impact* on their overall well-being. During the analysis of the sub-themes of *masking*, *ruined an entire generation of police officers*, and *staffing* that emerged under the *negative impact* theme, the sub-theme of *uncertainty* emerged as a significant factor on the participants' well-being. *Uncertainty*, previously defined as a lack of clarity and trust in the decisions of agency leaders, encompassed the participants' thoughts when discussing the *negative impacts* of leader decisions on their well-being. This finding corroborates Wolfe et al.'s (2018) research on leadership and uncertainty, emphasizing the importance of organizational justice as a stress mitigation factor.

Positive Impact

The study participants who recalled and discussed the *positive impact* theme related to the decisions made by their leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic presented data that resulted in the sub-themes of *call management*, *modified assignments*, and *morale boost*. *Call management* and *modified assignments* sub-themes revolved around action items experienced during the pandemic. While these are important to understanding the *positive impact* theme, the actions are more generally summed up and applicable to use in the sub-theme *morale boost*. Generally, the *morale boost* sub-theme suggests the positive feelings associated with the participant's well-being because of being involved in the decision-making directly or believing that their organizational leaders understood their concerns when decisions were made. This openness and transparency in decision-making, resulting in a *positive impact* on police officers' well-being, corroborates Russell et al.'s (2018) previously discussed findings.

Theoretical Literature

The design of this study used the constructivist grounded theory approach for data gathering with the intention of developing a new theory that emerged from the analysis of and grounded in the research data. This methodology distinguishes the study from previous research that used other qualitative or quantitative research methodologies. Fundamental to using the grounded theory approach, this research project did not test any previous theory explored by other researchers. However, this theory was guided by previous theoretical exploration and literature on elements of the research focus. The results of this study inform various aspects of the previously discussed theoretical literature and the framework under which this study was designed. This section will discuss the research findings associated with the theoretical framework, specifically focusing on COVID-19, police officer well-being, and law enforcement leadership.

COVID-19

The findings of this constructivist grounded theory study bolster the emerging area of research surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, as discussed in the literature review chapter. Since the declaration of the public health emergency in March 2020, researchers have sought to understand the impact that the coronavirus pandemic had on various elements of society. The participants in this research project overwhelmingly concurred that the COVID-19 pandemic was an *unprecedented* event in their careers as police officers, detectives, and first-line law enforcement supervisors. This study further supports Stogner et al.'s (2020) early research on the COVID-19 pandemic and their findings that the health crisis will have a significant and long-term impact on law enforcement organizations.

Similarly, many of the participants' discussions corroborated Gaitens et al.'s (2021) findings that organizational leaders play a significant role in mitigating psychological stress and physical harm during long-term, uncertain events like the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis of this study's participants suggests that police officers, detectives, and first-line supervisors recognize their role in public health emergencies at the conceptual level. However, the COVID-19 pandemic operationalized these concepts on a scale that many organizations were unprepared to handle.

Police Officer Well-being

The findings of this study support many of the previously reviewed theoretical literature on police officer well-being. Primarily, the findings support the previous research on the impact of organizational stressors, such as bureaucracy, on police officer well-being. The research findings of this dissertation suggests that police officers, detectives, and first-line supervisors found *negative impacts* on their overall well-being in response to uncertain decisions and lack of transparency in the decision-making process, which aligns with Brunetto et al.'s (2017) research. Additionally, this study's findings corroborate Hurtado et al.'s (2018) research on occupational stressors, such as sporadic and precarious work schedules, similar to those experienced by the participants in this research.

The findings of this research also support the work-family conflict concept discussed in the literature review section of this research. Throughout all the participants' responses, the primary stressor related to the COVID-19 pandemic and their role as police officers, detectives, and first-line supervisors was the potential impact on the health and well-being of their families. The fear of bringing home the virus and exposing their families was a significant stressor that impacted the well-being of the participants, especially in the early stages of the pandemic.

Law Enforcement Leadership

The findings of this study confirmed the previous literature presented surrounding the continued use of the traditional police leadership or command-and-control style of leadership within police organizations in today's law enforcement. While the participants recognized there may be times that this approach has utility, as it relates to police officer well-being, the traditional police leadership style does not provide *positive impacts* on police officer well-being. The findings in this study suggest that traditional police leadership increases *negative impacts* on police officer well-being and is counterproductive to reducing stress in police officers. These findings further indicate that the traditional police leadership style breeds a lack of trust due to the frontline workers' inability to provide input into the decision-making process, which is supported by Russell's (2019) research findings.

The research in this study suggests that the characteristics of Servant Leadership can, however, positively impact police officer well-being, consistent with previous studies reviewed for this research project. Specifically, the law enforcement leaders' adoption of the Servant Leadership characteristics of active listening, empathy, stewardship, and building community increased the positive impacts on police officer well-being in this study. These findings support Russell et al.'s (2018) research on the Servant Leadership organizations and police officer well-being. One element of building community is involving followers in the decision-making process, which is often referred to as autonomy. Based on the findings of this dissertation research, autonomy was considered a critical element that increased positive well-being for police officers, detectives, and first-line supervisors.

Implications

The results of this constructivist grounded theory study on the impact of law enforcement leadership decisions on police officer well-being during COVID-19 have significant implications to the theoretical and empirical research on the topic of law enforcement leadership and police officer well-being. The findings of this research expand the knowledge of these critical research fields. Additionally, this constructivist grounded theory research has critical implications for practical application for law enforcement leaders and policy makers concerned with police officer well-being and effective leadership theories applicable to law enforcement organizations. This section of the chapter discusses the potential implications of this study for academic, research, and practitioner use. Additionally, this section offers recommendations for law enforcement leaders.

Theoretical

From a theoretical perspective, the primary implication of this research includes the emergence of a theory to explain an understudied area of academia. The findings of this research suggests that the process that law enforcement leaders use to make decisions is impactful to police officer well-being, specifically in long-term, uncertain incidents like the global coronavirus pandemic. Furthermore, this theory posits that those law enforcement leaders who rely on a hierarchal, command-and-control decision-making process that is closed to follower input and does not allow for feedback from those personnel who are in the position to provide current and relevant information on the given situation are likely to increase the feelings of frustration, stress, and negative well-being in frontline police officers. Conversely, the theory posits those leaders who utilize an open or participative style of leadership, decision-making, and

communication that solicits follower input, allows for feedback, and emphasizes autonomy are likely to increase feelings of positive well-being, such as the morale boost observed in this study.

The theory that emerged from and is grounded in the dissertation research data has some similarities to other theoretical research previously reviewed. Specifically, this theory corroborated Sarver and Miller's (2014) research on police chief leadership styles and the importance placed on characteristics of openness as it relates to increased police officer engagement, which is an element of well-being. However, this theory is unique from Sarver and Miller's research due to the emphasis placed on the decision-making process and how those processes impact overall police officer well-being. The findings of this research suggest law enforcement leaders should look for opportunities to increase police officer involvement in the decision-making processes or, when this is not feasible, provide adequate communication on how the decisions were made. Additionally, the findings of this research suggest law enforcement leaders should engage frontline police officers, detectives, and first-line supervisors for feedback on decisions made. Using these avenues of increased police officer engagement in the decision-making process would increase feelings of autonomy, the building of community, and have positive impacts on police officer well-being.

Like the findings of Russell et al.'s (2018) case study on an agency that adopted Servant Leadership as a fundamental leadership style for the organization, the theory that emerged from this dissertation research found support for the Servant Leadership style and its probability of promoting the mental and emotional health of police officers. The findings of this dissertation research, however, goes further by investigating the impacts of the traditional law enforcement leadership style. Specifically, the theory derived from the research data of this dissertation suggests that law enforcement leaders that rely on decision-making processes that are closed to

input from followers, are not fully communicated, and do not allow for feedback increase negative feelings of stress and uncertainty in frontline police officers, detectives, and first-line supervisors. With this knowledge, coupled with the participants perspectives of having a *job to do*, add credence to the importance of the decision-making process over the outcome of the decision itself.

A second theoretical implication of this study is the important role that the work-family conflict has on police officers, detectives, and first-line supervisors. The results of this study showed that the *family impact* was the primary stressor experienced by law enforcement officers during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study expanded the knowledge base on this topic from the previously held theories on long work hours and missed events to the real potential impact that an exposure to the coronavirus could have on family members' physical health. Based on these findings, law enforcement leaders should keep the *family impacts* of their decisions in mind during long-term, uncertain incidents like those experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Empirical

From an empirical perspective, this study provides a unique window into the perspectives of police officers, detectives, and first-line supervisors from their own words and related to the decisions of their leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. The thematic perspectives of these participants resulted in an emerging theory derived from the research data with profound implications. The primary implication of this study is the recognition that the process of leadership decision-making has a more significant impact on police officers than does the final decision outcome. Frontline police officers, detectives, and first-line supervisors want to know their concerns are heard and valued when confronting circumstances like the COVID-19

pandemic. Additionally, these critical stakeholders desire increased autonomy in the process of determining decisions that impact their well-being.

A secondary empirical implication from this study is the realization that many law enforcement organizations still rely on the traditional police leadership as a primary leadership style. While the command-and-control approach to leadership has some utility in short-lived, unambiguous incidents, this study suggests in long-term, uncertain incidents like the COVID-19 pandemic, a more open leadership style that allows for follower input, effective communication, and avenues for feedback has a *positive impact* on police officer well-being. This implication is supported by the findings of the leadership studies reviewed for the theoretical framework of this dissertation research (Jackson & Lee, 2019; Martin et al., 2017; Russell et al., 2018; Sousa & Dierndonck, 2017).

During the data gathering and analysis portion of this process, a unique perspective of law enforcement was explored because of the COVID-19 pandemic. As previously discussed, the decision to close businesses and schools during the pandemic put university and college law enforcement officers in a precarious circumstance where they worried about being laid off from their jobs due to having no students on campus. This was a unique circumstance for this type of law enforcement officers and the leaders in these organizations worked to assuage these concerns by using modified assignments such as temperature and wellness checks at building entrances. This empirical knowledge was a unique discovery experienced by the participants of this research and was not found in any other literature explored for this dissertation.

Practical

The practical implications of the findings of this study have significance for stakeholders within law enforcement organizations. For those stakeholders in executive-level leadership

positions of a police organization, these study findings suggest that relying on traditional police leadership could have a detrimental impact on the well-being of police officers. Frontline workers in law enforcement organizations should be afforded the ability to provide input and feedback on decisions made in response to long-term, uncertain incidents like the COVID-19 pandemic. Police officers desire to feel like their perspectives are heard and that their leaders listen to their concerns. Using an open leadership style, such as Servant Leadership, that focuses on characteristics like active listening and empathy provide followers with increased positive well-being and leaders with increased knowledge that can be used to make decisions.

Recommendations

One of the goals of this research project was to provide law enforcement leaders with practical recommendations to use in future long-term, uncertain events like the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of this research allow for the inclusion of recommendations that law enforcement leaders can implement to improve police officer well-being during these types of crises. The first recommendation is for law enforcement leaders to establish a mechanism for frontline workers to provide useful feedback on leadership decisions. This could be in the form of surveys, focus groups, or one-on-one discussion opportunities. The results of these mechanisms should be communicated frequently to allow for police officers to recognize their role in formulating decisions.

A second recommendation for law enforcement leaders is to receive and provide training in leadership styles beyond the traditional police leadership. This training should provide the theoretical underpinnings of the style and practical applications for use of the style. Understanding the practical use of these leadership styles is critical in expanding a leader's ability to confront varying circumstances throughout their career. Having the ability to use

multiple leadership styles as the situation requires them is vital for the growth of a law enforcement leader, the organization, and the communities they serve.

Delimitations and Limitations

All research studies have certain delimitations and limitations, due to myriad factors, that must be recognized and discussed to properly situate the research. This dissertation project is not exempt from those delimitations and limitations. Delimitations are those choices made by the researcher that set the boundaries and scope of the project to make it more manageable and applicable to the study's goals. For this project, several delimitations were made prior to the start of the project. The following delimitations were highlighted:

1. Participant Eligibility: The study specifically focused on the lived experiences of frontline police officers, detectives, and first-line supervisors; therefore, no information was gleaned on frontline civilian positions (dispatchers, administrative staff, analysts, etc.), command-level (middle management), or executive staff of any law enforcement agency.
2. Setting: The study focused on a geographic region, specifically the Central Virginia Region, to gain insight from various types of law enforcement organizations and did not focus on one specific agency or type of law enforcement organization.
3. Well-being: This study focused on a general definition of well-being from a macro-level that encompassed the individual's state of positive feelings and ability to achieve full potential in the world; therefore, measuring the impact of leader decisions on the micro-level or base elements of well-being was not explored in this research.

The limitations of a research study are those characteristics of the project that may be viewed as weaknesses of the research and may influence the study outcomes and conclusions.

Identifying these limitations is critical to understanding the structure, reliability, and trustworthiness of the research. The limitations of this dissertation project are highlighted as the following:

1. Participant Sample Size: This study was limited to focusing on the lived experiences of police officers, detectives, and first-line supervisors within the Central Virginia Region and not on a specific organization. As such, the participant sample size was limited due to the pool of willing and available candidates. Twelve participants met the requirements of the study and were willing to participate in all elements of the data gathering process. Therefore, care should be given when attempting to generalize this study's application to a specific organization. Additionally, the participants selected for this study were volunteers that completed the edibility screening survey and agreed to participate in the remaining portions of the data gathering process. Therefore, it should be noted that even though racial and gender minorities were represented, there were no African American or Asian participants and only one female participant that expressed interest in participating in the study. The addition of these categories could have benefited the results and conclusions of the research.
2. Researcher: As a 24+ year veteran and law enforcement leader of a statewide policing agency, this researcher personally experienced many of the challenges of decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic. To control bias and the potential for conflict of interest, the study was limited to not include participants from the researchers' law enforcement organization. This limitation leaves out a large group of law enforcement officers with a unique perspective of enforcement and challenges of dealing with a global

pandemic that may have influenced the outcomes of the research. Additionally, bias as a law enforcement leader was controlled through reflexive memo journaling.

3. Participant Perspectives / Memory: This study was focused on the lived experiences of police officers, detectives, and first-line supervisors that experienced the well-being impact of their law enforcement leadership decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic, which spanned March 2020 through the end of the public health declaration in May 2023. The selected participants were interviewed for this study between March and April of 2023, more than three years after the start of the pandemic and within weeks of the end of the public health declaration. The participants' perspectives were based on their recollection of the events from their viewpoint and subject to the impact of time on their memories. Executive-level personnel were not interviewed for this study and their perspectives were not directly considered for inclusion in this study. Therefore, the study is limited to these parameters and not a direct evaluation of the specific decisions made by law enforcement leaders.
4. Time and Resources: The time and resources required for additional data gathering and theory testing was another limitation to this study. The dissertation process necessitates following a certain prescribed timeline and therefore did not afford the opportunity for this research to seek additional participants and lines of interview that could have better defined the theory that emerged from the initial data gathering and analysis. This is also an opportunity for future research which is explored in the next section of this chapter.

Recommendations for Future Research

The results of this study produced a theory that emerged from the data analysis and sought to explain the research questions for this dissertation. Due to the limitations explored in

the previous section, that theory has opportunities for future research recommendations. The first recommendation is that the research conducted in this dissertation should be replicated from a different setting focus. Since this research was conducted within the setting of a geographical region versus a specific agency or type of law enforcement organization, future researchers could use this approach to explore the ability to reproduce these findings within a specific law enforcement organization. Furthermore, this research was conducted from the perspective of the police officers, detectives, and first-line supervisors with no insight from command or executive-level leaders. Future researchers could explore the perspectives of these law enforcement personnel to gain additional knowledge in this area.

Lastly, the theory developed from this research should be tested to confirm its validity. Future researchers have many angles from which to explore this theory. Researchers could select an organization that espouses the use of an open leadership style, like Servant Leadership, and explore the perspectives of police officers in relation to their leader's decision-making process during the COVID-19 pandemic to see what impact the open leadership style had on the police officer's well-being. Similarly, researchers could select an organization that relies on the traditional police leadership model and explore in greater detail the impacts of that decision-making process on police officer well-being.

Summary

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory dissertation was to explore the lived experiences of police officers, detectives, and first-line supervisors and determine the impact of the decisions made by their leaders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic on their overall well-being. The results of this study produced a theory was derived from the gathered data that answered the research questions. This new theory suggests that the leadership style and process

for decision-making, communication, and availability of feedback on those decisions used by a law enforcement leader has a significant impact on a police officer's overall well-being, particularly during long-term, uncertain crisis incidents. Leaders who use a closed leadership and decision-making style with limited opportunity for follower input, unclear communication, and lack of feedback, such as the traditional police leadership, have a higher probability of negatively impacting the well-being of their frontline police officers and first-line supervisors.

Alternatively, those law enforcement leaders who use a leadership and decision-making style that is more open to the inclusion of follower input, use effective communication, and allows for feedback, such as Servant Leadership, have a higher probability of impacting the well-being of their frontline police officers and first-line supervisors positively.

This research project provided implications for academic and practitioner stakeholders looking to improve police officer well-being. Based on the study findings, police leaders who are facing long-term, uncertain incidents and are concerned about maintaining or improving the well-being of their police officers should use an open decision-making process that provides transparency and opportunity for feedback. Additionally, the findings of this study recommends that law enforcement leaders receive and provide training on various leadership styles that can be used to expand the capabilities of their management skills throughout the organization and equip those leaders with additional tools to respond to changing needs throughout their careers.

The current study has significance to stakeholders in academia and practitioners that seek to improve the skills of law enforcement leaders. Notably, this research informs the knowledge on law enforcement leadership, police officer well-being, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on law enforcement organizations. Future research recommendations are included for further consideration in this vital research and practical application area.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

March 8, 2023

Jason Spencer
Gregory Koehle

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-874 IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP DECISIONS ON POLICE OFFICER WELL-BEING: A COVID-19 RESPONSE

Dear Jason Spencer, Gregory Koehle,

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).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

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.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B: Qualitative Open-Ended Questions

Demographic Information

1. What is your gender?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Non-Binary
 - d. Other _____
 - e. Prefer not to state

2. What is your age?
 - a. 20-29 years
 - b. 30-39 years
 - c. 40-49 years
 - d. 50-59 years
 - e. 60+ years

3. How would you identify your race?
 - a. White
 - b. Black or African American
 - c. Hispanic
 - d. American Indian or Alaska Native
 - e. Asian
 - f. Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
 - g. Other _____
 - h. Prefer not to state

4. What is your highest level of education?
 - a. GED
 - b. High School
 - c. Some College
 - d. Associate degree
 - e. Bachelor's degree
 - f. Master's degree
 - g. Doctoral degree

5. Law Enforcement Experience
 - a. 0-5 years
 - b. 6-10 years
 - c. 11-15 years
 - d. 16-20 years
 - e. 21-25 years
 - f. 26-30 years
 - g. 31+ years

6. Current law enforcement rank
 - a. Uniformed Field Officer/Deputy
 - b. Plain Clothes Detective/Special Agent/Investigator
 - c. Front- or First-Line Supervisor
 - d. Command Level Leadership
 - e. Executive Level Leadership
 - f. Other _____

Questionnaire Questions

1. Tell me about your law enforcement organization. Approximately how many personnel?
Description of community served (urban, suburban, rural).
2. Tell me about your law enforcement career. How many years of service? Current rank?
General description of duties?
3. How would you describe your overall well-being prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?
4. Apart from the COVID19 crisis, are you currently exposed to any extraordinary private stressors (e.g., infection or death of a relative, divorce)?
5. How do you compare the COVID-19 pandemic to other emergencies you deal with in your career related to your well-being?

Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Interviews

1. Tell me your general thoughts about the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. How does the unknown status of COVID-19 of coworkers and citizen contacts make you feel?
3. How did the COVID-19 pandemic change how you did your job?
4. What policy changes related to COVID-19 made by leaders did you perceive as positive?
5. How did these changes positively impact your well-being?
6. Are these changes still in place, and how do you feel about that?
7. What policy changes related to COVID-19 made by leaders did you perceive as negative?
8. How did these changes negatively impact your well-being?
9. Are those changes still in place, and how do you feel about that?
10. How do you feel about the process used by leaders to make decisions in response to COVID-19?
11. How would you describe the leadership characteristics of your law enforcement leaders making decisions on COVID-19 issues?
12. How would you describe your overall well-being today?

Probing Questions

- Continuation probes
 - “Tell me more...”
- Elaboration probes

- “Tell me more about that...”
- Verbal Agreement probes
 - “Yes, ok...”
- Clarification probes
 - “You said ____. What does that mean to you?”
- Steering probes
 - “Let’s get back to when you said _____.”
- Evidence probes
 - “Tell me about a situation when something like that happened?”
- Echo probes
 - The interviewer repeats the participant’s response to encourage elaboration.
- Silent probes
 - The interviewer remains silent to encourage the participant to think out loud.

Appendix D: Participant Recruitment Memorandum – Police Agency Head

XXXXXX, 2023

The Honorable XXXX
Sheriff, Chief, Etc.
Agency
Address
City, State, Zip

Dear Agency Head:

As a graduate student in the Helms School of Government at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degree in Criminal Justice with a focus on Leadership. The title of my research project is “Impact of Leadership Decisions on Police Officer Well-Being: A COVID-19 Response”, and the purpose of my research is to understand the impact of law enforcement leader decision making in response to COVID-19 on the well-being of police officers.

Participants must be sworn law enforcement officers actively working as a frontline employee (officer, deputy, agent, detective, etc.) or first-line supervisor in the Central Virginia Region now and prior to March 2020. Participants, if willing, will be asked to complete an online questionnaire followed by an in-person or virtual audio-recorded interview, the results of which will be available for participant review prior to use in the study. The online questionnaire should take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. Interviews will be scheduled at a mutually beneficial time for the participant and researcher and should last approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

I am respectfully requesting that you share the attached participation flyer with your sworn law enforcement officers and first-line supervisors. Please have interested participants scan the QR code or click the hyperlink on the flyer to complete the online survey.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead indicating your approval.

Sincerely,

Jason N. Spencer
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University Helms School of Government



Appendix E: Participant Recruitment Memorandum – Professional Organization Head

XXXX, 2023

XXXXXX

Executive Director

Address

City, State, Zip

Dear Director XXXX:

As a graduate student in the Helms School of Government at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degree in Criminal Justice with a focus on Leadership. The title of my research project is “Impact of Leadership Decisions on Police Officer Well-Being: A COVID-19 Response”, and the purpose of my research is to understand the impact of law enforcement leader decision making in response to COVID-19 on the well-being of police officers, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be sworn law enforcement officers actively working as a frontline employee (officer, deputy, agent, detective, etc.) or first-line supervisor in the Central Virginia Region now and prior to March 2020. Participants, if willing, will be asked to complete an online questionnaire followed by an in-person or virtual audio-recorded interview, the results of which will be available for participant review prior to use in the study. The online questionnaire should take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. Interviews will be scheduled at a mutually beneficial time for the participant and researcher and should last approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

I am respectfully requesting that you share the attached participation flyer with your members. Please have interested participants scan the QR code or click the hyperlink on the flyer to complete the online screening survey.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead indicating your approval.

Sincerely,

Jason N. Spencer

Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University Helms School of Government

[Redacted]

Appendix F: Participant Recruitment Social Media

ATTENTION FACEBOOK FRIENDS: I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. in Criminal Justice: Leadership at Liberty University. The purpose of my study is to understand the impact of law enforcement leader decision-making in response to COVID-19 on the well-being of police officers. To participate, you must be a sworn law enforcement officer actively working as a frontline employee (officer, deputy, agent, detective, etc.) or first-line supervisor in the Central Virginia Region now and before March 2020. Additionally, you cannot be an executive or command-level law enforcement leader or an employee of the Virginia State Police. Participants will be asked to complete an online questionnaire followed by an in-person or virtual audio-recorded interview, the results of which will be available for participant review before use in the study. The online questionnaire should take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. Interviews will be scheduled at a mutually beneficial time for the participant and researcher and should last about 45 minutes to 1 hour. If you want to participate and meet the study criteria, please click here [REDACTED] to complete the participant eligibility screening survey. Participants who complete the online questionnaire and the interview will receive a \$25 Amazon.com gift card as remuneration for their time.

Appendix F: IRB Approved Consent Form

Consent

Title of the Project: Impact of Leadership Decisions on Police Officer Well-Being: A COVID-19 Response

Principal Investigator: Jason N. Spencer, Doctoral Candidate, Helms School of Government, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a current sworn law enforcement officer (police officer, deputy, detective, agent, etc.) or first-line supervisor of a Central Virginia Region law enforcement agency and employed in this or a similar capacity prior to March 2020 and not an executive or command-level law enforcement leader or amember of the Virginia State Police. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this research study is to understand the impact of law enforcement leader decision-making in response to COVID-19 on the well-being of police officers. The research aims to understand how police officers perceived the decisions and the decision-making process police leaders used in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in an online questionnaire that will last approximately 5 – 10 minutes.
2. Next, you will participate in an in-person or virtual interview (at your discretion), which will be audio-recorded for future analysis. The interview is expected to last approximately 45 – 60 minutes.
3. Lastly, you will review your interview transcription for accuracy and clarification. This is expected to take approximately 5 – 10 minutes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include expanding the academic knowledge in the area of police officer well-being and the impact of leadership styles and decision-making in police agencies. Additionally, this study adds to the academic knowledge on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on society. Lastly, this study aims to provide law enforcement leaders with best practices or recommendations for future event of similar scope and magnitude as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Liberty University
IRB-FY22-23-874
Approved on 3-8-2023

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

The risks involved in this study include the possibility of psychological stress from being asked to recall and discuss prior experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. To reduce risk, I will monitor participants, discontinue the interview if needed, and provide referral information for counseling services.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher and faculty sponsor will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data collected from you may be shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked external hard-drive and in a locked file cabinet. After five years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password locked external hard-drive for five years and then deleted. The researcher and members of his doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. At the conclusion of the interview, participants will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address or phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Jason N. Spencer. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [REDACTED]

██████████ You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Gregory Koehle, at ██████████

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to the person named below participating in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date