

NAVIGATING SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS: THE ROLE AND STRATEGIES OF
LAW ENFORCEMENT SPOUSES IN PROMOTING FAMILY WELL-BEING AND
RESILIENCE

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Abstract

Law enforcement officers' (LEO) spouses play an important role in supporting their officers and maintaining family well-being and resilience in the face of unique challenges associated with the law enforcement career. This hermeneutic phenomenological study explores the experiences, challenges, and strategies LEO spouses utilize to navigate their roles' demands and promote resilience within their families. This study aimed to understand better LEO spouses' perceived roles and strategies for fostering family well-being and resilience. Specifically, it explored the challenges accompanied by the law enforcement career that LEO spouses face, the coping strategies they utilize, and the factors contributing to their resilience. This study involved conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with seven LEO spouses residing in different states across the United States. Thematic analysis was utilized for data analysis, followed by a rigorous iterative process that allowed the identification of key themes related to the roles and strategies of LEO Spouses. These included the psychological impact of the job on officers and their spouses, navigating challenging shift work, lack of support, perceived roles and responsibilities, family resilience, and fostering family well-being through coping strategies. This study's findings shed light on LEO spouses' multiple roles and experiences and provide valuable insights into their strategies to maintain family well-being and resilience. By understanding the distinct challenges these spouses face and the strategies they use to cope with stressors, support organizations can better tailor interventions to meet the needs of law enforcement families.

Keywords: secondary traumatic stress, law enforcement officer spouse, family well-being, resilience, critical incidents

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Dedication

To my son, who was just 18 months old when I embarked on this journey, and who has been my greatest teacher in love and patience. I will always treasure the countless moments of juggling responsibilities with you by my side. Thank you for being my companion on this unique path.

To my loving husband, who has been my unwavering support throughout this journey, thank you for being my rock during moments of doubt and guiding me when I felt lost. Your unconditional love and encouragement have been instrumental in my success. I am forever grateful for your presence by my side.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Overview

Chapter one provides an overview of this research study, laying the groundwork for exploring the critical role of law enforcement officer (LEO) spouses and the effects of occupational stress on family dynamics. The background section delves into the motivation and preparation for a law enforcement career, shedding light on the occupational stress encountered by recruits during their time in the training academy. Furthermore, that section briefly explores the impact of recent police actions and the high expectations from the community, which have contributed to increased tension and stress experienced by law enforcement families. The chapter also includes sections on the situation to self, problem statement, purpose statement, the significance of the study, research questions, definition, and a summary. Through this comprehensive overview, readers will clearly understand the research context, objectives, and the specific components that the study will further examine and explore in detail throughout the chapter. Additionally, this chapter delves into the significant impact of occupational stress on law enforcement officers and their families, examining stress's unmeasurable nature and the subsequent trauma experienced by the officers, which profoundly affects the well-being of them and their families.

Background

A career in law enforcement is often driven by numerous factors and motivators, including fighting crime, enforcing the law for a better community, and the desire and drive to help others (Clinkenbeard et al., 2021). Based on the research by Rohwer et al. (2022), job satisfaction significantly impacts law enforcement officers' physical and mental well-being. The overburden and trauma experienced by officers are unmeasurable as each individual responds

differently to traumatic situations based on many known factors associated with the individual's personality, level of education, and known skills. Physical, cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal skills are known to be effective traits by police officers for effective policing (Blumberg et al., 2019). The hiring process takes months to complete as it is known to be long and arduous to ensure the candidates hold the skills needed to succeed in the occupation. The extensive screenings conducted during the application phase are necessary to ensure that candidates possess the skills needed for the job. However, during the training and probationary period, the candidate's ability to perform as a police officer occurs (Hilal & Litsey, 2020). It is during the law enforcement training academy that candidates experience the demands and expectations of the occupation, and this process serves as a method to filter out those who may need to possess the strengths to handle the job. The duration of the law enforcement training academy may vary from several weeks to months, allowing the candidates to transition from non-officer to officer roles. The transition from non-officer roles to the officer role is crucial preparation for the demands of the occupation; however, officers need to prepare with coping strategies to deal with the occupational stress resulting in the displacement of frustration. Alexander and Walker (1996) found that police officers utilize the scapegoating or displacement method to relieve frustration in those around them, including family and friends. LEO spouses need to be granted training or preparation on what to expect from the shift of their partner's behaviors; these shifts can negatively impact the overall well-being and resilience of the family unit.

Additionally, recent police movements have created stressors for law enforcement officers and their families as respect towards law enforcement officers nationwide has shifted from positive to negative in many parts of the country. A series of social and political

movements in the United States have arisen that have sought to address issues related to policing practices. Most recent movements include Black Lives Matter, the defund the police movement, and the police accountability and transparency movement. Over the years, the role of law enforcement officers has evolved to include not just crime prevention and investigation but also community engagement and service (Lamin & Teboh, 2016). The trauma and stress that follows the law enforcement occupation impact officers' emotional well-being, negatively affecting interpersonal relationships and creating a sense of separation from their spouses. According to Friese (2020), LEO spouses are susceptible to secondary traumatic stress (STS) due to the officer's occupation. STS, burnout, and vicarious traumatization have often been used interchangeably to describe compassion fatigue; however, as defined by Dr. Beth Stamm, they are different outcomes of exposure (Cocker & Joss, 2016). According to Charles Figley, symptoms of secondary trauma surface from a human relationship in which an individual becomes traumatized due to close contact with an individual who has experienced trauma (Meffert et al., 2014). Secondary traumatic stress (STS) is a well-known topic that mirrors symptoms of PTSD experienced by those who have an intimate relationship with those who experienced firsthand trauma (Sharp et al., 2022). Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms result from direct exposure to traumatic events, while indirect exposure to traumatic events results from STS (Perez et al., 2010). Trauma occurs after a single occasion where one perceives it as dangerous, resulting in a physiological response, pumping adrenaline to jolt the muscles into action and the stress hormone cortisol to increase blood sugar and intense power movement (Sathyapalan et al., 2017). Two individuals who have experienced the same traumatic experience may exhibit mild or transient symptoms (Briere & Scott, 2014; Chopko & Schwartz, 2012). Ultimately, individuals may respond differently to the same traumatic situation (Kleber,

2019). Studies have shown that law enforcement officers' mental health and well-being have been impacted by occupational stress, resulting in long-term and short-term harmful outcomes. The level of occupational stress each officer encounters can result in job dissatisfaction, long-term disability, and burnout, among many other short-term and long-term effects (Anderson et al., 2002; Anshel, 2000).

A longitudinal study by Meffert and colleagues (2014) explored the connection between PTSD, the emotional distress of a spouse or partner of a police officer, and relationship violence. The data for this study was gathered over 12 months, before and after the experience of occupational stress. This study aimed to understand how symptoms of PTSD in law enforcement officers impact their spouses' emotional well-being and whether this emotional distress increases the risk of experiencing relationship violence. The study found that spouses of law enforcement officers perceived the officers' PTSD symptoms and predicted their symptoms of STS. The presence of STS was associated with an increase in overall relationship violence. While the study by Meffert et al. (2014) focused on the perception of PTSD symptoms experienced by officers was predictive of STS experienced by spouses, increasing the likelihood of relationship violence, there is limited research on the role of the spouse and how they manage the impact of occupational stress on family life. What is not known is how the responsibilities that spouses take on to maintain the family unit and mitigate the adverse effects of stress contribute to symptoms of STS.

Law enforcement work remains inherently stressful and unpredictable, with officers often exposed to traumatic events and daily dangers. The culture within law enforcement places a significant emphasis on toughness, often neglecting the mental health and well-being of those involved. While there has been a growing recognition in recent years regarding the importance of

addressing the mental health needs of law enforcement officers, relatively less attention has been given to understanding the impact of policing on law enforcement families. LEO spouses frequently encounter distinctive challenges that encompass navigating an unsupportive and nurturing environment for family members, establishing effective communication, engaging in shared decision-making, balancing multiple roles and responsibilities, and fostering family cohesion. By understanding the broader context of policing and its impact on officers and their families, we can work toward developing strategies to support the mental health and well-being of LEO spouses and the officers themselves.

While there is an understanding in the literature of the high-stress levels encountered by law enforcement officers, little attention has been given to the extent of stress experienced by the LEO spouses and its implications for family dynamics and well-being. This study examines the need for more understanding of the roles and contributions of LEO spouses in fostering family well-being and resilience. Through interviews and surveys, the research aims to gather comprehensive and diverse data to explore this phenomenon.

Situation to Self

As an LEO spouse, I have a personal connection and vested interest in the topic of the role that spouses proudly hold to maintain family well-being and resilience. The role of the LEO spouse has captivated my attention as I am drawn to reflect upon my experiences with police culture. Often, the community struggles to grasp the nuances and complexities of the law enforcement culture and the occupational stress experienced by the officers and families. My academic studies and passion for the mental health field have allowed me to raise awareness and advocate for the needs of law enforcement families. The personal connection to this topic is a foundation for my research study, driving my dedication to exploring solutions that will make a

difference in this vital area.

Problem Statement

The problem addressed in this study is the need to understand LEO spouses' roles, experiences, and strategies in navigating STS and fostering family well-being and resilience. The literature has recognized the dangers associated with law enforcement careers, which not only manifest in symptoms of STS among officers but also extend to their spouses (Friese, 2020). Although research has recognized the challenges law enforcement officers and families face, little attention has been given to understanding LEO spouses' unique contributions and actions in promoting healthy family dynamics. LEO spouses frequently encounter challenges that require daily navigation, compelling them to assume multiple roles within their family dynamic. A closer look at these challenges and their effect on the well-being of the LEO spouses will allow for a better in-depth understanding of their role and the strategies they utilize to navigate symptoms of STS and promote resilience. The gap hinders the development of interventions and support that can improve the functioning and resilience of law enforcement families. Hence, it is imperative to investigate and identify LEO spouses' roles, experiences, and strategies to address this gap and provide evidence-based guidance for supporting the well-being and resilience of law enforcement families.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to understand the roles, lived experiences, and coping strategies of LEO spouses in navigating STS within their family dynamic. The study will examine the experiences of LEO spouses residing in various regions across the United States. At this stage in the research, STS will be greatly defined as the emotional and psychological strain experienced by LEO spouses due to their indirect exposure to

traumatic, critical incidents through their close and intimate relationship with their law enforcement spouse. This phenomenon often manifests in symptoms of heightened anxiety, tension within marital relationships, hypervigilance, and disruptions in interpersonal connections. These symptoms are usually adopted as coping mechanisms in response to the challenges and stressors accompanied by the unique demands of the law enforcement career. Through an in-depth exploration of STS and its impact on law enforcement families, the study seeks to understand LEO spouses' perceived roles, experiences, and strategies to promote family well-being and resilience as they navigate STS. The findings of this research aim to contribute valuable insights and evidence-based guidance for effectively supporting the well-being and resilience of law enforcement families. This researcher's findings will contribute to developing interventions and support systems tailored to LEO spouses and their families' unique needs, promoting more vital family dynamics and resilience within the law enforcement community. As the study progresses, a more comprehensive understanding of STS will be developed through an in-depth exploration of LEO spouses' experiences and strategies for navigating the challenges associated with the law enforcement career. The theories guiding this study are role theory, family resilience theory, and stress and coping theory. Role theory examines how responsibilities influence an individual's behaviors, self-perception, and how others interpret their behavior (Anglin et al., 2022). By examining the roles and responsibilities of LEO spouses, one can understand the expected behavior tied to their perceived role. Stress and coping theory explores how individuals perceive and respond to stressors. It emphasizes the importance of coping strategies in managing stress, particularly when individuals perceive a situation as stressful and believe efforts are needed to manage or resolve it (Biggs et al., 2017). Within this theory, we will explore how LEO spouses navigate and respond to the everyday stressors accompanied by law

enforcement careers to understand the coping mechanisms utilized to maintain well-being and resilience amidst these challenges. Family resilience theory focuses on the strengths and dynamic processes that enable families to adapt and thrive in adversity (Walsh, 2003). Enhancing the understanding of LEO spouses' mental well-being necessitates recognizing their capacity to adapt to life challenges, which signifies resilience. These theories collectively provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the experiences of LEO spouses and their strategies for fostering family well-being and resilience.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the existing literature on secondary traumatic stress (STS) by exploring the often-overlooked lived experiences of LEO spouses. This population has received limited attention in previous research (Cox et al., 2020; Frieze, 2020; Karaffa et al., 2014). It draws on stress and coping, family resilience, and role theories to deepen our understanding of how LEO spouses navigate and respond to the emotional and psychological strain associated with STS. Empirically, this study adds to the growing research on STS by focusing specifically on the experiences of LEO spouses. Previous research has primarily concentrated on the experiences of first responders themselves, overlooking the unique challenges their spouses or families face (Landers et al., 2019; Porter & Henriksen, 2015; Tuttle, 2018). The findings of this study will have practical significance for the potential to impact the lives of LEO spouses and their families positively. Such significance includes recognizing and understanding the impact of STS on LEO spouses and implementing targeted interventions to improve family dynamics, reduce occupational stress, and enhance law enforcement officers' work effectiveness. Furthermore, this study's findings can be used on a broader scale to advocate for policy changes

within law enforcement agencies and inform the development of support programs for law enforcement families nationwide.

Research Questions

Research Question 1. How do LEO spouses perceive their roles and responsibilities in maintaining family well-being and resilience?

Research Question 2. How do LEO spouses navigate potential barriers or obstacles to maintaining family well-being and resilience?

Definitions

In this research study, occupational stress experienced by law enforcement officers' manifests in physical, psychological, and behavioral symptoms. The demands of the job negatively impact the officer's well-being and functioning. Occupational stress has a significant impact on law enforcement families, particularly LEO spouses. Secondary traumatic stress emerges as a result of the occupational stress experienced by officers and manifests in individuals who are indirectly exposed to the trauma of others. The role of the LEO spouse includes experiencing STS based on their partner's work-related trauma affecting family well-being. Family well-being is the overall health and stability within a family unit. Family well-being has multiple aspects, such as effective communication, family support, and resilience. Resilience refers to adapting to adversity by maintaining positive functioning and growing stronger after traumatic situations.

Chapter One Summary

The introduction of this research study provides a comprehensive overview of the primary purpose, which is to study LEO spouses' roles, experiences, and strategies implemented to combat symptoms of STS and maintain family well-being and resilience. Background on the

demands of the occupational stress faced by law enforcement officers and its overall effects on their well-being was explained. The specific objectives of this study were outlined, concentrating on understanding the role of LEO spouses and delving into experiences and strategies utilized to maintain family well-being and resilience in the face of STS. A qualitative research study design was chosen, using in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. An adapted hermeneutic phenomenological approach will be adopted to gain a comprehensive understanding of LEO spouses' lived experiences and perspectives. The significance of this study is to address the well-being and provide support to spouses and law enforcement families.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Overview

The literature review summarizes existing knowledge and research on family well-being and resilience within LEO spouses, focusing on STS, perceived roles and responsibilities, resilience and strength, and communication and support within these families. The review will begin by exploring existing literature on the impact of STS on law enforcement families, examining how exposure to trauma through their spouse's work affects their mental and emotional well-being. This section will explore studies that highlight the symptoms of STS, burnout, and maladaptive coping mechanisms, including substance use and addiction. Following this exploration, the review discusses research on perceived roles and responsibilities, investigating the expectations placed upon LEO spouses, including navigating caregiving and household responsibilities and managing challenges related to work schedules, which often result in increased responsibilities, and exploring how these roles influence experiences of stress. Next, the review examines the literature on resilience and strength within law enforcement families, exploring factors that promote resilience and buffer against the adverse effects of STS. This section identifies protective factors, coping mechanisms, and post-growth factors that contribute to family well-being and adaptation. Lastly, the review addresses the importance of communication and support within law enforcement families, analyzing studies that explore how effective communication and social support networks can mitigate the impact of STS and foster resilience. A critical analysis is employed throughout the review to identify common themes, discrepancies, and gaps in the literature, highlighting areas for further investigation.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this research study serves as a lens through which the roles, experiences, and strategies of LEO spouses in navigating STS and promoting family well-being and resilience are examined. This study incorporates three interrelated theories: role theory, family resilience theory, and stress and coping theories. These theories provide a comprehensive lens through which LEO spouses face complex dynamics and challenges in the context of their partner's occupation. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the researcher seeks to deepen comprehension of this population's unique roles, experiences, coping strategies, and resilience factors in spite of STS. This theoretical framework enriches the analysis and guides the development of effective interventions and support systems tailored to the needs of law enforcement families. The subsections provide a detailed overview of each theory and its relevance to the research questions. The key concepts, principles, and empirical findings associated with each approach are explored to shed light on the role of LEO spouses and their strategies for maintaining family well-being and resilience as they navigate symptoms of STS.

This study adopts Biddle's role theory framework to explore LEO spouses' multiple roles, expectations, and responsibilities in fostering family well-being and resilience amidst the challenges posed by STS. Biddle's framework provides a theoretical lens for understanding how individuals navigate their social roles and responsibilities within specific contexts. It offers insights into societal expectations, personal identities, and coping mechanisms. Biddle argues that role expectations can manifest in various modes of thought, including norms, preferences, and beliefs (Biddle, 1986). This perspective aligns with the broader concept of role theory, which states that individuals hold different social roles, each characterized by specific expectations, responsibilities, and behaviors (Anglin et al., 2022). By applying this theoretical framework, the

study seeks to illustrate how LEO spouses arrange their roles as partners, caregivers, and emotional supports, shedding light on the processes underlying family dynamics and resilience within law enforcement families.

Stress and coping theory provide valuable insights into how individuals, including law enforcement officers and their spouses, perceive and respond to stressors inherent in their roles. Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model of stress and coping emphasizes the dynamic between individuals and their environment. According to this model, stress arises from the ongoing appraisal process, where individuals evaluate environmental demands regarding their available resources (Berjot & Gillet, 2011). Essentially, individuals assess whether they have the necessary resources to effectively manage or cope with the demands of a given situation. This self-assessment of resources involves both primary and secondary appraisals, two cognitive mechanisms individuals utilize (Berjot & Gillet, 2001). Firstly, primary appraisal involves recognizing the potential threats posed by a situation, and secondly, it entails assessing one's ability to cope with the event by considering internal and external resources. Coping strategies, ranging from problem-focused approaches like seeking social support to emotion-focused techniques such as cognitive reframing, play a crucial role in mitigating the impact of stressors on psychological well-being. Both coping strategies are used upon experiencing a stressful situation, and both depend on how the individual appraises the situation, determining whether it can be changed or not (Berjot & Gilet, 2011). The stress and coping theory provides a comprehensive framework to understand how individuals respond to stressful environmental situations. Through this model, LEO spouses' appraisals and responses to the challenges of STS are analyzed within the law enforcement family dynamic, allowing for an exploration of the coping strategies utilized and the factors that contribute to their resilience.

The family resilience theory, developed by Walsh (2003), serves as a foundational framework for understanding the dynamics of resilience within family systems. Family resilience is primarily influenced by the quality of relationships within the family unit (Cox, 2022; Walsh, 2003). The family resilience framework draws from ecological and developmental perspectives and comprehensively explains how families confront and overcome adversity (Walsh, 2003). The ecological perspective considers how external environmental factors influence family resilience while the developmental perspective focuses on internal processes within individuals and families and how they contribute to resilience over time (Walsh, 2003). This theory serves as a guiding framework for exploring the coping and adaptive strategies utilized by LEO spouses in navigating STS within their families. This study examines the effects of external factors, such as community resources, social support networks, and organizational policies, on family well-being and resilience through the ecological perspective. Through the developmental perspective, this study also examines the internal processes by exploring how family dynamics, roles, and relationships evolve and how these changes influence the family's ability to adapt in the face of adversity.

The theoretical framework for this research study draws upon role theory, Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model of stress and coping, and family resilience theory. Biddle's role theory provides a lens through which to understand LEO spouses' assumed roles, expectations, and responsibilities within the family and societal dynamic. Understanding these roles can explain how they shape each LEO spouse's experiences and coping strategies in the face of STS. Lazarus and Folkman's model illuminates the cognitive appraisal process and coping strategies individuals employ in response to stress, offering insights into how LEO spouses navigate the challenges of secondary traumatic stress. Family resilience theory, grounded in ecological and

developmental perspectives, highlights internal and external factors that enable families to adapt and thrive in adversity. It offers insights into how LEO spouses and their families navigate challenges while maintaining resilience. By integrating these theories, the study aims to explore and understand the roles, coping mechanisms, and resilience factors of LEO spouses facing secondary traumatic stress within their families. Thus, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of their unique challenges and informs tailored interventions and support systems.

Related Literature

Impact of STS on the family dynamic

The first theme of this study focuses on exploring the profound impact of secondary traumatic stress (STS) on the family dynamic within law enforcement families. Understanding the effects of STS on the family unit is crucial for comprehending the challenges LEO spouses face to promote the family's well-being and resilience. The occupational stress that law enforcement officers experience affects their well-being and their families. The psychological difficulties that arise from the law enforcement occupation can impact the family life of LEO spouses, who frequently deal with the aftermath of their officer spouses' jobs (Landers et al., 2019). Secondary trauma has the potential to worsen existing challenges in communication and emotional intimacy within couples' relationships (Landers et al., 2019). Therefore, gaining a deeper understanding of the effects of trauma on law enforcement couples could lead to the development of more resources aimed at supporting couples where one partner is directly exposed to work-related trauma (Landers et al., 2019). According to a study cited by Tuttle et al. (2018), LEO spouses shouldered the burden of work-related stress and emotional strain commonly associated with police work, leading to elevated levels of family conflict (as cited in Burke, 1993). Roberts and Levenson (2001) researched emotions in law enforcement couples.

They discovered that both spouses experienced lower levels of positive affect, whereas the officer spouse exhibited higher negative affect, and LEO spouses reciprocated with lower positive and negative affect levels. Additionally, the study found that high levels of work-related stress were associated with increased physiological arousal and decreased somatic activity for both officers and LEO spouses during communication tasks. These results indicated a “disconnect” pattern in couples on days when the officer experienced high job stress (Roberts & Levenson, 2001). A significant finding from the study by Friese (2020) indicates that 63% of LEO spouses acknowledged experiencing hypervigilance, while 70 % reported exposure to critical incidents. The qualitative data from focus groups further highlighted the presence of hypervigilant behaviors among these LEO spouses, indicating the profound influence of occupational stress on their mental and emotional state (Friese, 2020). In a study by Landers et al. (2019), two subthemes were identified. The first explored how trauma affects law enforcement officers both behaviorally and emotionally, while the second subtheme addressed the impact of secondary trauma on LEO spouses. Following the traumatic event, participants described experiencing a wide range of emotional responses. These responses encompassed mood fluctuations, detachment, internalization of the experience, heightened vigilance, reexperiencing or reliving the event, feelings of anxiety, and avoidance (Landers et al., 2019).

Additionally, research has demonstrated that law enforcement officers frequently encounter demanding and distressing circumstances on the job. Violanti and Aron (1994) have identified incidents such as killing someone in the line of duty, having a fellow officer killed, physical attacks, battered children, high-speed chases, and shift work as some of the most high-stress events experienced by law enforcement officers. The effects of occupational stress encountered by law enforcement officers extend beyond the individual, significantly influencing

their spouses and family dynamics (Cox et al., 2022; Friese, 2020). In a study by Friese (2020), a recurring theme emerged where participants frequently utilized social media platforms and news sources to remain informed about critical incidents. This reliance on external sources of information adds to the strain experienced by LEO spouses; however, accessing information through these channels also provided a sense of relief by easing their fears (Friese, 2020).

Understanding the far-reaching consequences of traumatic events is essential for comprehending the complexities of post-traumatic experiences and their implications for individuals and families. In the context of STS, various terms such as burnout, compassion fatigue, vicarious traumatization, and traumatic countertransference are commonly used in the research and practice literature (Salston & Figley, 2003). According to Charles Figley, these symptoms arose from an empathetic relationship with the traumatized individual through which close contact is affected by the trauma and manifests symptoms very similar to PTSD (Devilly et al., 2009; Meffert et al., 2014). In a phenomenological study conducted by Porter and Henriksen (2015), the experiences of being an LEO spouse were studied, and stress was a significant theme that emerged. All six participants expressed that stress often creates challenges within their homes, and some spouses even felt a sense of responsibility for supporting and helping to relieve the stress experienced by their first responder partner (Porter & Henriksen, 2015). Instances of violence, disasters, accidents, and conflicts, whether in the context of law enforcement or the broader community, can have profound and lasting effects on individuals and their relationships (Kleber, 2019). Officers exposed to high levels of occupational stress often suffer from various physical health issues and psychological difficulties, significantly impeding their ability to effectively perform their duties (Morash et al., 2006). Although the symptoms are typically not

as disabling as PTSD, they include the same type of distress, including avoidance, hyperarousal, and intrusive symptom clusters (Devilly et al., 2009; Meffert et al., 2014).

The concept of vicarious trauma focuses on the cognitive effects of indirect exposure to others' trauma. It involves a shift in worldview resulting from empathetic engagement with victims who experienced trauma. Vicarious trauma symptoms include disturbances in a professional's cognitions related to safety, trust, esteem, intimacy, and control, both to oneself and others (Pearlman, 1996, as cited in Cieslak et al., 2014). According to Meffert et al. (2014), burnout is a syndrome characterized by exhaustion, cynicism/detachment, and a sense of efficacy resulting from interpersonal job stressors, which can include working with traumatized individuals. Researchers have acknowledged that compassion fatigue, closely linked to caregiver burnout, is considered a specific form of secondary traumatic stress (Meffert et al., 2014). The debate surrounding the operationalization of these constructs highlights the difficulty in differentiating between compassionate fatigue and secondary traumatic stress (Tessitore, 2023). Studies, such as the one conducted by Cieslak et al. (2014), have revealed a significant overlap between burnout and secondary traumatic stress when examined within the framework of compassion fatigue.

Burnout

The concept of burnout within law enforcement families is a crucial aspect to explore under the theme of STS. Burnout is currently understood as a psychological phenomenon that arises in response to chronic stressors within work-related interpersonal dynamics (Maslach et al., 2001). According to Maslach et al. (2001), burnout is characterized by three core-dimensional responses to job stressors: cynicism, overwhelming exhaustion, a sense of ineffectiveness, and lack of accomplishment. These dimensions reflect burnout's central "stress"

qualities and have been instrumental in understanding its nature and impact (Deville et al., 2009). The prevalence of burnout among law enforcement officers has significant implications for them, LEO's spouses, and their families (Porter & Henriksen, 2015). According to a study conducted by McCarty et al. (2019) involving a sample of 13,000 police officers across 89 police agencies in the USA, researchers found that 19% of the sample reported experiencing emotional exhaustion every week, while 13% exhibited severe levels of depersonalization. These findings suggest that burnout is a prevalent issue among law enforcement officers. Considering the close relationship between LEO spouses and officers, it is crucial to recognize the potential impact of burnout on LEO spouses' well-being and the family unit's overall dynamics. In a study by Jackson and Maslach (1982) examining the relationship between experienced burnout, quality of life, and coping behaviors among police officers and their spouses, significant findings emerged. The results indicated that police officers reported mild to moderate emotional exhaustion, moderate depersonalization, and moderate to intense feelings of personal accomplishments. LEO spouses and officers differed significantly in their coping behaviors, with officers resorting more to smoking, drinking, and finding distractions; in contrast, LEO spouses leaned toward talking to friends, engaging in religious activities, and participating in organized groups (Jackson & Maslach, 1982). A study by Karaffa et al. (2014) found that a significant majority of participants within the spouse group (89.2%) indicated that their spiritual beliefs provided them with inner strengths. Coping behaviors were related to the quality of family life, with discussing things with one's spouse positively associated with marital satisfaction and husbands' involvement in family matters. The use of alcohol as a coping mechanism was negatively correlated with marital satisfaction (Jackson & Maslach, 1982). These findings highlight the interplay between burnout, coping behaviors, and family dynamics within law enforcement families.

Substance Abuse and Addiction

Understanding the prevalence and implications of substance abuse, particularly alcohol consumption, among law enforcement officers is crucial for comprehending the challenges law enforcement families face and their ability to cope with STS. Research showed that substance use disorder (SUDs) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) frequently co-occurred (McCauley et al., 2012). The co-occurrence of SUDs and PTSD in the law enforcement profession points to the need for a deeper examination of the impact of substance abuse on family dynamics. Building upon this understanding, the study conducted by Violanti et al. (2011) sheds light on several significant aspects of alcohol use among law enforcement officers. Male officers were found to be at a higher risk for hazardous alcohol use, and younger female officers faced increased risk (Violanti et al., 2011). Surprisingly, work-related stressors like PTSD and depression did not significantly influence officers' drinking behavior. However, external life events like divorce were associated with increased hazardous drinking among male officers (Violanti et al., 2011). These findings underscore the importance of addressing the effects of police work on personal and family life, especially concerning substance abuse. LEO spouses often face elevated levels of stress and exhaustion, which, when combined, raise the probability of resorting to maladaptive coping strategies (Roberts & Levenson, 2001). A study conducted by Ballenger et al. (2010) aimed to explore the prevalence and predictors of alcohol use among urban police officers. The study's findings indicated that alcohol consumption occurred almost daily among the participating police officer; specifically, 7.8% of urban police officers in the sample reported abuse (Ballenger et al., 2010). The results of this study shed light on the patterns and predictors of alcohol use within the law enforcement culture. Findings suggested that the high-stress nature of police work and exposure to traumatic incidents contributed to the use of

substances, particularly alcohol, as a coping mechanism (Ballenger et al., 2010). While alcohol may have provided temporary relief, it can significantly contribute to future psychiatric symptoms and pose additional challenges for officers and their families (Baker et al., 2021).

Perceived Roles and Responsibilities

The second theme explores LEO spouses' perceptions and experiences regarding their roles and responsibilities within law enforcement families. Law enforcement families often face unique challenges due to the demanding nature of the occupation, which can significantly impact the roles and dynamics within the family unit. Exploring LEO spouses' perceived roles and responsibilities gives us an understanding of the dynamics and challenges associated with work schedules, caregiving responsibilities, and household responsibilities. The following sections explore these concepts, drawing upon relevant research, empirical evidence, and practical implications for supporting LEO spouses in their unique roles within law enforcement families. LEO spouses face high expectations of resilience and support in helping their law enforcement partners overcome trauma, often leaving little time to process their symptoms of STS, turning to other LEO spouses or spousal support groups within the community (Landers et al., 2019). With a deep commitment, LEO spouses wholeheartedly embrace their role and adapt to the job's demands to foster unity and cohesion within their families (Maynard et al., 1980). However, they also encounter the ongoing challenges of managing and coping with chronic and traumatic stressors while providing essential supportive care (Landers et al., 2019). This fact highlights the significance of role expectations. Studies have shown that law enforcement families face unique challenges balancing work demands and personal life.

Understanding how identity influences role expectations and perceptions can shed light on law enforcement families' coping strategies, communication patterns, and overall well-being.

For example, a qualitative study by Porter and Henriksen (2015) found that all six participants expressed immense pride not only in their spouses' occupations but also in identifying themselves as part of the larger first responder community. The study findings suggested that the first responder lifestyle is strongly associated with a distinct identity, possibly influenced by safety concerns and the overall culture within the first responder community (Porter & Henriksen, 2015). As law enforcement families worked through the profession's demands, their identities were intertwined with the roles they fulfill. This interplay between identity and roles can influence how they manage stress, maintain boundaries, and seek support from family and friends.

Work Schedule

Law enforcement work often involves irregular and demanding schedules, including rotating shifts, long hours, overnight shifts, and weekend or holiday work. These irregular schedules can disrupt the routine and stability of family life, impacting the availability of LEO spouses for family activities, shared responsibilities, and quality time together (Karaffa et al., 2014; Porter & Henriksen, 2015). Irregular work schedules can create challenges in coordinating childcare, managing household tasks, and maintaining work-life balance (Karaffa et al., 2014). Considering the prolonged work hours spent away from home and the cultural expectations associated with being a first responder, individuals may experience challenges in being mentally present for their families even when physically at home (Regehr, 2005). According to Roberts et al. (2012), one of the most common challenges officers experience daily was separating work demands from personal life, leading to role conflicts and stress. This challenge was exacerbated by irregular schedules, mandatory overtime, and extended shifts commonly associated with police work (Rohwer et al., 2022). The demanding nature of these work conditions not only

affected the division of roles and responsibilities but also impacted the mental and physical health of police officers. Rohwer et al. (2022) found that irregular schedules, mandatory overtime, and extended shifts were associated with risks of burnout, contributing to higher rates of stress, exhaustion, and work-family conflict among officers. The results of this study indicated that law enforcement officers encounter notable challenges related to work-life conflict, job stress, and job dissatisfaction. Law enforcement officers often face the challenge of balancing the demands of their job and their commitments to their marriage, as their unconventional schedules and frequent overtime shifts compete for their time and dedication (Karaffa et al., 2014; Miller, 2007).

In some cases, law enforcement officers voluntarily work substantial overtime hours, motivated by factors such as financial incentives, alignment with the department's culture emphasizing toughness, or a genuine commitment to their profession (Miller, 2007). These work demands can give rise to perceived conflict in family dynamics, as indicated in a study conducted by Karaffa et al. (2014), where spouses tended to report significant concerns related to financial matters and emotional intimacy. Regarding financial concerns, 36% of spouses indicated a high level of conflict over finances, and almost 35% indicated a medium level of conflict (Karaffa et al., 2014). Such conflict can significantly impact families and spouses, who may experience frustration and need to independently manage household responsibilities and parenting duties. Building on the experiences of spouses married to law enforcement officers, another study by Porter and Henriksen (2015) highlighted financial hardships as a prominent theme among the participants. The study revealed that these challenges increased time spent away from home, as officers had to seek additional employment outside of police work to cope with financial pressures (Porter & Henriksen, 2015). Investigating the impact of work schedules

on law enforcement families reveals the significant challenges posed by officers being away from home due to financial obligations, which often lead them to seek additional overtime or employment opportunities. However, it is essential to recognize that the effects of the law enforcement occupation extend beyond the officers themselves.

LEO spouses who are also working professionals navigate their own set of unique challenges in this dynamic environment. Balancing the demands of their careers with the responsibilities of supporting their law enforcement partners and maintaining a healthy family life can present a delicate juggling act. For instance, research conducted by Elloy and Smith (2003) with a sample of lawyers and accountants revealed that dual-career couples experience higher stress levels, work-family conflict, and overload than their single-career counterparts. These findings resonate with the experiences of law enforcement families, where both LEO spouses and officers often have demanding careers and face similar challenges in balancing work and family responsibilities. Understanding the experiences of these working LEO spouses can provide valuable insights into how dual-professional families cope with the inherent complexities and stressors associated with the law enforcement occupation.

Examining the impact of workload on both LEO officers and spouses is crucial. Workload refers to the amount and intensity of work individuals must manage in their job roles (Bowling et al., 2015). In law enforcement, where stress and exposure to trauma are prevalent, the workload can be a significant stressor for law enforcement families. A high workload can increase stress and work-family conflict, negatively affecting the officer and spouse's psychological and physical well-being. Research findings indicated that social support from co-workers and supervisors is negatively associated with workload, while role ambiguity, role conflict, and work-to-family conflict were positively associated with workload (Bowling et al.,

2015). Due to the demanding nature of law enforcement work schedules and the workload law enforcement officers face, the available time for officers to engage in caregiving activities and family responsibilities may be limited. This limited time often burdens LEO spouses, who may find themselves taking on more significant caregiving responsibilities and household management. As officers work long hours and may be subject to shift rotations, their availability for family time becomes constrained. Consequently, LEO spouses may have to assume a larger share of caregiving responsibilities to ensure their children's well-being and the household's smooth functioning.

Caregiving Responsibilities

In law enforcement families, the perception of roles and responsibilities takes a unique dynamic, particularly regarding caregiving responsibilities. Law enforcement officers frequently navigate demanding work schedules, extended hours, and regular exposure to high-stress situations. These factors can significantly impact their ability to fulfill their caregiving responsibilities within the family. LEO spouses play a crucial role in managing and balancing caregiving responsibilities to ensure the well-being of the family unit. Various studies have explored the perceptions and experiences of family members, particularly spouses, within law enforcement families. These studies shed light on spouses' unique challenges in managing their roles and responsibilities. In a qualitative study by Cox et al. (2022), participants shared a feeling of being a single parent due to the long work hours and overall demand of the occupation, leading to role overload, exhaustion, and resentment. This study shed light on the significant impact of law enforcement occupation on family dynamics. It highlights the need to acknowledge the strain on spouses who often bear the bulk of parenting. The findings of this study underscore the importance of recognizing and supporting the role of spouses within law

enforcement families, as their experiences can significantly influence family functioning and well-being.

Additionally, LEO spouses frequently assume the responsibility of caring for children, as law enforcement officers tend to experience work-related stress that can result in negative moods at home. According to the study findings, around 33% of LEO spouses indicated that their significant other tends to express anger toward family members following a stressful work event (Karaffa et al., 2014). Additionally, 31% of participants agreed that their officer spouse tends to assert dominance in decision-making, while approximately 30% agreed that their officer spouse tends to release work-related stress onto the family (Karaffa et al., 2014). Role overload is a prominent aspect of caregiving responsibilities for LEO spouses, primarily when officers frequently work long and irregular hours.

Household Responsibilities

Household responsibilities play a significant role in the perceived roles of LEO spouses within law enforcement families. Research by Campbell et al. (2022) has shown that the stressful nature of the job impacts coping strategies, parenting, and household role responsibilities. As law enforcement officers navigate demanding work schedules and multiple commitments, LEO spouses take on the crucial task of managing various household duties. However, the strain on the spouse's shoulders goes beyond mere household responsibilities. The officer's prioritization of work over family time and their dismissive attitude toward homemaking tasks can lead to a growing sense of resentment and emotional burden within the relationship (Miller, 2007). Therefore, it is vital to address these dynamics and promote open communication to ensure the well-being and cohesion of law enforcement families. In a study conducted by Landers et al. (2019), participants were found to play a pivotal role in supporting law enforcement officers

through their empathetic nature, willingness to take on additional responsibilities, provision of emotional support, caregiving efforts, use of humor, encouragement, flexibility, and adaptability to the law enforcement officer's needs. Participants' various forms of support and understanding significantly contributed to law enforcement officers' overall well-being and resilience, enhancing their ability to navigate and cope with the challenges inherent in their profession.

Resilience and Strengths

The third theme focuses on resilience and strengths within law enforcement families. Resilience refers to the ability to adapt and bounce back from adversity, while strengths encompass the resources, skills, and positive attributes individuals and families possess (Dickinson, 2020). Law enforcement families often demonstrate remarkable resilience in the face of the unique stressors and challenges associated with the occupation. This theme explores the factors enabling law enforcement families to adapt, bounce back, and thrive in adversity. This literature review examines three key concepts that are pivotal in enhancing resilience within LEO families: protective factors, coping strategies, and family resilience. Understanding these factors is crucial for promoting resilience, fostering well-being, and effectively supporting law enforcement families in navigating the complexities of their lives.

Protective Factors

Protective factors play a significant role in enhancing the resilience of law enforcement families. These factors can include individual characteristics such as self-efficacy, problem-solving skills, and a sense of purpose. Additionally, family-level characteristics such as cohesion, adaptability, and effective communication contribute to the family's ability to withstand and overcome adversity. Exploring these protective factors can provide valuable insights into the existing strengths within law enforcement families and how they can be leveraged to promote

well-being and resilience. Family pride encompasses a sense of collective identity, support, and appreciation for the occupation of their law enforcement spouse. Family pride can foster a strong bond and a shared commitment to the values and mission of law enforcement, providing a source of strength and cohesion within the family unit. This collective pride contributes to a sense of belonging and connection and influences coping strategies and adaptive responses to the challenges law enforcement families encounter. By recognizing and exploring the role of family pride as a protective factor, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of its impact on family dynamics, communication, and the overall well-being of law enforcement families. Despite the stress these families experience, there is often a strong sense of pride regarding the law enforcement occupation (Porter & Henriksen, 2015). In one study, Porter and Henriksen (2015) also identified a relationship between pride and civic-mindedness, where participants discussed a sense of duty and responsibility to the community. A survey conducted in a study by Karaffa et al. (2014) revealed that a significant proportion of spouses (86.6%) reported feeling proud of their partners' careers in law enforcement, with spouses indicating higher levels of perceived pride than officers. Additionally, the findings indicated that nearly 80% of spouses expressed optimism about their partner's future as a police officer, and approximately 66% affirmed their willingness to marry a police officer, even with knowledge of the familial impact (Karaffa et al., 2014).

LEO spouses' sense of pride for their partner's occupation can foster a deep appreciation and gratitude. Gratitude has been associated with various positive psychological outcomes, including increased well-being, improved mental health, and greater life satisfaction (McCanlies et al., 2018). A cross-sectional study aimed to explore how social support, gratitude, resilience, and life satisfaction affect depression symptoms among police officers in the aftermath of

Hurricane Katrina. The study found that social support and gratitude is directly related to fewer depression symptoms (McCanlies et al., 2018). Additionally, social support and resilience improved life satisfaction and reduced depression symptoms (McCanlies et al., 2018).

Coping Strategies

Coping mechanisms, such as those employed by law enforcement families, play a vital role in reducing the detrimental impact of trauma (Landers et al., 2019). These strategies enable family members to effectively navigate and cope with their challenges, contributing to their overall resilience and well-being. Strategies can be categorized into adaptive and maladaptive types, with adaptive coping involving active problem-solving, taking control, and showing empathy. In contrast, maladaptive coping includes behaviors like social withdrawal, denial, aggression, and discrimination (Amnie, 2018). A study by Friese (2020) found that LEO spouses reported experiencing stressors similar to or higher than the officers themselves. In response to these stressors, they were found to use negative coping strategies twice as often as positive ones. Conversely, a study by Regehr et al. (2005) found significant implications for supporting the fire service and may offer insights for interventions benefiting families of various emergency workers. The study revealed that firefighters' wives were highly dedicated to their spouses and showed strong support for their careers. These women actively employed adaptive strategies to balance family life with the demands of their husbands' occupations. Despite the firefighters' attempts to conceal distress and downplay the risks associated with their job, the spouses sought to alleviate their partners' stress (Regehr et al., 2005). However, the nature of firefighting introduces numerous types of ambiguous loss that disrupt the established balance within families. Such losses encompass physical absences caused by shift work, emotional and physical distances arising from firefighters' camaraderie, emotional absences related to trauma responses,

and the uncertainty and insecurity faced when other firefighters are injured or killed (Regehr et al., 2005). Conversely to the earlier study, which primarily investigated job-related stressors and their impact on family dynamics, the more recent study delved into the intricacies of coping strategies utilized by law enforcement couples to foster resilience. In a qualitative study conducted by Brodie and Eppler (2012), exploring coping mechanisms revealed three distinct strategies law enforcement couples utilize. This research study highlighted the various ways couples navigate challenges and shed light on the resilience-building processes within the law enforcement community. This examination offered valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of coping mechanisms and their role in supporting individuals and relationships amid the unique stressors law enforcement officers and their spouses face.

Family resilience

Family resilience emphasizes the collective ability of a family unit to adapt, bounce back, and thrive in the face of adversity (Walsh, 2003). Within this context of family resilience, “bond adaptation” refers to the family’s ability to adapt and regulate changes and attain stability in the face of adversity (Henry et al., 2015). Family resilience supports the well-being of law enforcement families amidst the prevalent stress and trauma of the occupation. One essential aspect of fostering family resilience is through targeted interventions that enhance coping strategies and strengthen family bonds. Resilience-building interventions have shown promise in supporting law enforcement families, equipping them with the tools and skills to overcome stress and traumatic experiences. Effective family processes, characterized by caring and committed relationships, played a vital role in dealing with adversity (Walsh, 2003). Accurate acknowledgment of the stressor’s nature was vital for fostering transparent communication (Cramm et al., 2018). Moreover, the family’s resilience and capacity to withstand and overcome

adversity were bolstered by factors such as long-term marriage, a strong sense of family identity, adequate financial resources, and access to social support (Henry et al., 2015). Positive adaptation was likely to occur in a warm, supportive, and cohesive emotional climate that responds to the needs of family members. Supportiveness was displayed within the marital dyad and extended to parent-child and sibling relationships, supported by effective communication, conflict management, emotion coaching, and problem-solving skills (Henry et al., 2015). Problem-solving skills are crucial in empowering LEO spouses and their families to confront challenges proactively, effectively manage stress, and foster open communication. Nevertheless, as highlighted by Robert and Levenson (2001), the stress arising from job-related factors can lead to heightened arousal levels that may spill over into marital interactions, making it more difficult for individuals to think clearly and engage in effective problem-solving.

In summary, family resilience is vital in empowering law enforcement families to cope with challenges and cultivate a sense of stability and balance amidst the stressors they encounter. Bond adaptation becomes a cornerstone in fostering family resilience, enabling families to navigate adversity together and emerge stronger and more united. Targeted interventions and supportive family processes further enhance their ability to overcome obstacles and promote well-being.

Post-Growth

Interestingly, the experience of STS within law enforcement families can also lead to a phenomenon known as post-traumatic growth, recognizing that families challenged by life's adversities may discover new insights and abilities that strengthen their relationships and enhance their overall well-being (Walsh, 2003). Understanding the response to trauma involves considering both post-traumatic growth and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as potential

outcomes. As Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) described, posttraumatic growth signifies a profound transformation and enhancement of individuals' overall well-being, surpassing their previous state before the trauma. It is essential to recognize that post-traumatic growth is not simply a return to how things were before the traumatic event occurred. Instead, it represents a significant positive change and personal development that individuals experience as they navigate and overcome trauma challenges (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Through post-traumatic growth, individuals develop a greater capacity for empathy and forge meaningful connections with others who have encountered similar hardships (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). According to Walsh (2003), resilience is nurtured through collective and supportive beliefs that expand possibilities for resolving challenges, recovering, and experiencing personal development. These beliefs play a significant role in helping individuals find purpose amidst crises, promoting optimism and positivity, and providing a sense of higher purpose or spiritual grounding (Walsh, 2003). Given law enforcement families' unique challenges and stressors, it is plausible to suggest that LEO spouses may also experience post-traumatic growth. The increased sense of compassion and empathy described in the literature may foster stronger connections among LEO spouses, as they share a common understanding of the difficulties and sacrifices associated with the law enforcement profession. These deepened relationships and shared experiences have the potential to contribute to the personal growth and well-being of LEO spouses, enabling them to navigate the challenges they encounter with resilience and strength. The presence of a supportive social environment can contribute to the healing process following a traumatic event (Kleber, 2019). Research indicates that perceived adequate social support plays a crucial role in mitigating the impact of trauma on individuals and communities. A study by Weiss (2004) found that husbands' post-traumatic growth was positively correlated with receiving general social support,

positive quality of the marital relationship, and a level of post-traumatic growth experienced by their wives. This finding suggests that the support received from various sources, including the wife's post-traumatic growth and the overall social support network, positively influenced the husband's personal growth. Positive changes following trauma can be categorized into three types: an enhanced self of self, improved relationships with others, and a more comprehensive life philosophy (Christopher, 2004). Further research is warranted to explore the specific experiences and outcomes of post-traumatic growth among LEO spouses, shedding light on the potential positive transformation that can occur within this population. Furthermore, the symptoms of STS in LEO spouses have received limited attention, and there is a lack of studies exploring the role of LEO spouses and their coping mechanisms in managing these STS symptoms (Friese, 2020; Karaffa et al., 2014; Lander et al., 2019).

Communication and Support

The final theme centers on communication and support within law enforcement families. Effective communication and robust support systems are crucial for healthy family dynamics and well-being. Effective communication, social support, and organizational support contribute to law enforcement families' resilience and functioning. This theme explores the communication patterns, styles, and challenges within law enforcement families and the availability and effectiveness of various support systems within and outside the family unit. In addition to effective communication, social support plays a significant role in the well-being of law enforcement families. The support provided by friends, extended family, and the law enforcement community can offer emotional encouragement, practical assistance, and a sense of belonging. Furthermore, organizational support from law enforcement agencies can play a vital role in alleviating the stressors officers and their families face. These organizations provide

policies, programs, and resources to support officers' well-being, work-life balance, and family dynamics. By examining these concepts, we can gain a deeper understanding of LEO spouses' role in promoting resilience and enhancing the well-being of law enforcement families despite facing the challenges of STS.

Effective Communication

Effective communication within the couple's relationship is vital in coping with direct and secondary trauma exposure in law enforcement families (Landers et al., 2019). According to the study conducted by Landers et al. (2019), participants described a theme wherein they coped as a couple by engaging in open communication and discussing traumatic situations. They provided mutual support, demonstrated understanding toward each other, and allocated quality time together. This coping strategy was termed "couple coping" (Landers et al., 2019). LEO spouses and officers often navigate symptoms of PTSD, STS, depression, sleep disturbances, alcohol abuse, and hypervigilance (Karaffa et al., 2014). These factors can affect family relationships and create communication challenges within the household. Research exploring emotions within first responder relationships has acknowledged that the demanding nature of law enforcement work, comprising organizational and operational stressors, exposes officers and their romantic partners to potential adverse consequences (Tuttle et al., 2018). The culture within law enforcement is permeated by traditional masculine values and attitudes, often associated with the image of being a "tough guy," which are prevalent among male and female officers (Brimhall et al., 2018; Miller, 2007). These cultural values emphasize control, dominance, authority, and a lack of emotional expression (Miller, 2007). In certain circumstances, an officer may seek support from their spouse during periods of high stress, only to suddenly become uncommunicative and unwilling to discuss work-related matters (Miller, 2007). Conversely,

particularly severe events like shootings can serve as catalysts for officers to open up about their experiences with their spouses, even if they typically conceal their challenges (Davidson & Moss, 2008). Law enforcement officers often feel a strong need to protect their spouses from the dangers of their daily lives. However, this need to protect may sometime be perceived as an inability or unwillingness to be emotionally close, potentially leaving partners feeling distant and uncertain about their sense of security (Brimhall et al., 2018). In a supportive and nurturing environment, partners feel comfortable and secure expressing their needs, fostering open communication while removing harmful communication patterns (Brimhall et al., 2018).

These dynamics demonstrate the complexity of communication within law enforcement relationships. The emotional fluctuations can negatively affect LEO spouses and officers and the overall marital relationship. LEO spouses acknowledge and comprehend that emotional control and a commanding presence are integral to their partners' training (Karaffa et al., 2014). However, the demanding nature of the profession, which involves taking charge of situations and utilizing interrogation tactics, may not always translate into officers being empathetic and attentive listeners within their family dynamics (Karaffa et al., 2014). Spouses occasionally express dissatisfaction with officers' inability to "switch off" the mechanisms of authoritarianism and emotional control (Miller, 2007). According to the study by Karaffa (2014), most spouses reported positive communication dynamics within their relationships. Specifically, 85.4% agreed that they could discuss and resolve family problems with their significant other, while 84.3% indicated that their significant other could openly discuss work stress with family members. Over 77% of participants stated they can share intimate thoughts and feelings within the relationship (Karaffa et al., 2014). In a study by Brimhall et al. (2018) involving law enforcement officers and their partners, researchers found that displaying secure behaviors improved communication

and higher satisfaction in their relationship. The study revealed that constructive communication increased, demand-withdrawal patterns decreased, and overall relationship satisfaction improved due to secure behaviors (Brimhall et al., 2018). In a study by Roberts et al. (2012), participants reported that officers who viewed themselves and their partners as more accessible, responsive, and engaged demonstrated increased constructive communication and fewer patterns of demand/withdrawal. Additionally, they reported higher overall satisfaction in their relationship. These findings highlight the significance of effective communication with law enforcement relationships, where secure behaviors were associated with positive outcomes and improved relational dynamics (Roberts et al., 2012).

In the context of effective communication, an essential component in navigating STS within law enforcement families is the role of a couple coping. Research has highlighted the significance of couples engaging in adaptive coping strategies together to manage effectively STS's impact on their well-being. Doing so involves fostering open and honest communication and enjoying shared activities such as exercising, establishing routines, and incorporating humor (Landers et al., 2019). Sharing the experience of trauma can foster a unique understanding and empathy between partners, making couple coping strategies particularly effective in promoting emotional support, resilience, and overall well-being for both individuals within the law enforcement family. In the aftermath of trauma, the role of the LEO spouse involves assuming responsibility for challenges and experiences, leading to adopting a similar mindset as the officer. This mentality, characterized by the belief that "I am strong," stems from the perception that the officer relies on their spouse's support and understanding, with the notion that others outside the family may not fully comprehend the circumstances. However, research has shown that adopting police culture, values, and beliefs does more harm than good. Russell (2014) stated

that divorce rates increase when a law enforcement spouse adopts the police mentality. In a study by Landers et al. (2019), participants emphasized the need for ongoing support tailored to law enforcement families' unique challenges. Therefore, it is recommended that community agencies adopt a proactive approach by offering consistent and comprehensive support for LEO spouses and families rather than limiting support to times of crisis or tragedy (Landers et al., 2019).

Social Support

Law enforcement culture promotes the formation of close-knit bonds and exclusive camaraderie among fellow officers, leaving the spouse feeling neglected and experiencing feelings of jealousy (Miller, 2007). As a result, the officer may spend more time on the job or away from home, heightening the risk of extramarital affairs due to the growing divide caused by the spouse's resentment (Miller, 2007). While LEO spouses often directly support law enforcement officers in the aftermath of trauma, there may be a lack of reciprocation in return (Landers et al., 2019). According to Karaffa et al. (2014), the primary sources of support reported by spouses in dealing with stress were family members (77.5%) and friends (75.3%). A smaller percentage received support from other LEO spouses (27%) and fellow officers (11%). Professional counselors (4.5) and support groups (1 spouse) were mentioned as fewer common sources of support (Karaffa et al., 2014). One form of social support that can help mitigate the adverse effects of trauma exposure for officers is the emotional support provided by friends, colleagues, or a spouse. Research has demonstrated that when social support encourages individuals to express their emotions openly, it can be especially advantageous for officers after traumatic experiences (Davidson & Moss, 2008). Moreover, the presence of social networks and strong social connections are linked to positive emotions and well-being, and various studies have demonstrated their positive association with mental health (McCanlies et al., 2018).

Organizational Support

Law enforcement officers face unique challenges and demands, and a key factor influencing their overall well-being is the considerable amount of psychological and organizational stress they encounter. This stress can be broadly categorized into two distinct areas: operational stressors and organizational stressors (Baek et al., 2021). Operational stressors arise from on-duty experiences, such as traumatic events like shootouts. On the other hand, organizational stressors stem from the policies and practices within the police organization, including promotion procedures and management practices (Baek et al., 2021). Acknowledging and addressing these distinct stressors separately, we can develop targeted interventions and support systems that contribute to law enforcement families' resilience and mental health. Studies have shown that the psychological and organizational stress experienced by law enforcement officers can profoundly affect their mental health and overall well-being (Porter & Henriksen, 2015). A study by Brough (2004) comparing the impact of organizational and traumatic stress on emergency service workers revealed a noteworthy insight. Structural equation modeling techniques were used to analyze data from 686 officers in New Zealand's police, fire, and ambulance services, and the findings emphasized the far more significant impact of organizational stressors on job satisfaction than trauma symptomatology. According to numerous LEO spouses and officers, the most challenging aspect of being in law enforcement or being married to an officer is the presence of departmental politics (Karaffa et al., 2014). This finding demonstrates the impact of departmental politics on the experiences and perceptions of both LEO spouses and officers, highlighting the need for effective strategies to address and mitigate these issues within police organizations.

Departmental politics in law enforcement organizations are often rooted in the broader police culture that shapes attitudes, behaviors, and interactions. Central to the dynamics of police culture is the social construction known as ideology, which underpins a system of shared values and beliefs (Woody, 2005). Police culture, characterized by solid loyalty, camaraderie, and the blue code of silence, can create a closed and insular environment where internal dynamics and power struggles may arise. Seeking help, particularly regarding mental health support, goes against the traditional principles of policing (Papazoglou & Tuttle, 2018). The strong culture of loyalty and solidarity among officers may hinder open communication and constructive feedback, which can perpetuate departmental politics. Embracing the culturally relevant ideas associated with a law enforcement career is vital for gaining acceptance, job retention, and advancement (Woody, 2005). The unwritten rules and norms of police culture can impact how officers and their families navigate challenges and seek support within the organization. For instance, in a study conducted by Jetelina et al. (2020), it was found that police officers and their families may be hesitant to disclose their struggles due to concerns about confidentiality, skepticism about mental health professionals' understanding of their unique experiences, and the perception that seeking help may be perceived as a sign of weakness. The emphasis on toughness and self-reliance may discourage officers from expressing vulnerability or seeking help for stress-related issues, affecting their well-being and that of their families. Research indicates that individuals with post-traumatic stress and related symptoms often face challenges seeking assistance (Dickinson, 2020). The influence of police culture can extend beyond the workplace, impacting the personal lives of LEO spouses. The blue code of silence, a hallmark of police culture, may discourage officers from discussing their work-related stressors or traumatic experiences with their spouses, creating barriers to effective communication and emotional

support within the family unit (Brimhall et al., 2018). The impact of police culture on law enforcement officers becomes evident. The prevailing police culture adds to the sense of isolation experienced by officers and subjects them to continuous scrutiny from administrators (Woody, 2005). Law enforcement organizations operate in a highly demanding employment climate where officers face constant political criticisms, leading to a magnified focus on their conduct. Unfortunately, police culture may not always provide a protective shield against organizational critiques and disciplinary actions, exposing officers to heightened stress levels (Woody, 2005).

There is often a reluctance to seek help among law enforcement officers and their families, and this reluctance can be attributed, in part, to the societal judgment and stigma surrounding mental health. According to Royle et al. (2009), stigma occurs when different components, such as labeling, stereotyping, cognitive separation into ‘us’ and ‘them,’ loss of status, and discrimination, come together in a powerful situation, allowing these components to manifest and influence the perception of the stigmatized group. This is particularly true for those in law enforcement, as they may fear negative repercussions or invalidation from their peers and the community. This combination of internal and external factors plays an important part in addressing stigma and promoting a supportive environment that encourages help-seeking for law enforcement families. By exploring the interplay of departmental politics and police culture, we gain valuable insights into the broader sociocultural factors that shape the experiences of law enforcement families.

Chapter Two Summary

The literature review chapter explored various themes essential to understanding law enforcement family resilience and well-being. Within the perceived roles and responsibilities

theme, the analysis revolved around the influence of work schedules, caregiving responsibilities, and household duties on LEO spouses. The communication and support theme also delved into effective communication, social support, and the critical role of organizational support, including organizational stress, police culture, and leadership and supervisory support. Moreover, the chapter examined the impact of STS on law enforcement families, encompassing STS, burnout, and substance abuse. Lastly, the literature review explored family resilience and strength, focusing on protective factors, coping strategies, and family resilience, with attention to the transformative power of post-traumatic growth.

Chapter Three: Methods

Overview

This chapter outlines a comprehensive overview of the researcher methodology, discussing the research design, participant selection, data collection methods, credibility, and ethical considerations. Through a comprehensive overview of the research approach, chapter three provides transparency, allowing readers to evaluate the validity and reliability of the study findings. Ethical considerations such as protocols for obtaining informed consent, maintaining participant confidentiality, and addressing potential risks were thoroughly examined.

Design

A hermeneutical phenomenological qualitative approach is employed for this study to explore the unique perspectives individuals attribute to their shared experiences. Engaging individuals who have encountered a common phenomenon develop diverse meanings and understanding of those situations or experiences (Teherani et al., 2015). Through this phenomenological approach, the study aims to capture the nuanced narratives of participants, reaching for a deeper exploration of the subjective realities they construct. Individuals naturally seek understanding and derive meaning from their experiences and the world (Reiter, 2006). Ultimately, social interaction plays a crucial role in understanding language, as it is a primary means of communication; however, language can often lead to misunderstanding (Reiter, 2006). This study utilizes a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to investigate LEO spouses' roles, experiences, and strategies in promoting family well-being and resilience through the challenges of STS. Hermeneutic phenomenology allows for an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences and the meaning and interpretations of their roles within the family dynamics. In-depth semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted to capture participants' narratives,

allowing for reflection on their experiences. Interviews were conducted conversationally, using open-ended questions to encourage participants to share their personal stories, perceptions, and strategies for promoting family well-being and resilience. Purposeful sampling allowed for selecting participants who can provide a rich and diverse perspectives on the phenomenon of interest.

Analyzing the data involved transcribing the interviews, gaining a complete understanding of the participant's experience, identifying significant units of meaning, grouping the identified units of meaning, translating the units of meaning, interpreting the identified units of meaning, identifying key patterns that capture the entire narrative description, evaluating the narrative description for validity, and integrating the findings to create a comprehensive understanding (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). Additionally, the researcher engaged in reflexivity and self-awareness as an ongoing practice, acknowledging any preconceived notions to mitigate their potential influence on interpreting participants' experiences throughout the study (Miles et al., 2013). The central focus of this study was to highlight the significant roles and strategies in promoting family well-being and resilience.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the research process:

Research Question 1. How do LEO spouses perceive their roles and responsibilities in maintaining family well-being and resilience?

Research Question 2. How do LEO spouses navigate potential barriers or obstacles to maintaining family well-being and resilience?

Setting

This phenomenological qualitative study was conducted in the United States, chosen for

its accessibility to potential participants. This study involved recruiting participants through various law enforcement spouse communities on social media platforms. To recruit participants, the researcher utilized purposive sampling, targeting individuals currently in a committed relationship with a law enforcement officer. The researcher ensured the inclusion of participants from different backgrounds to ensure diversity in terms of age, ethnicity, and length of time in the relationship. In-depth semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted entirely in a virtual format. This approach ensured flexibility in participation from any location while maintaining ethical standards for confidentiality and data protection. Participants received comprehensive information about the research and its objectives, and pseudonyms were assigned to protect their identifiable information.

Participants

The participants for this study were recruited from various law enforcement spouse social media platforms with a focus on individuals located within the United States. The use of social media allowed for a diverse sample, capturing unique experiences and perspectives from this specific group. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed about the study objectives and provided with an information sheet before joining the research. The diversity of participants across the United States contributed to the richness of the data, reflecting on their experiences as LEO spouses.

Procedures

Before commencing participant recruitment, ethical approval for this study was sought from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Liberty University. The IRB was designed to protect individuals by minimizing risks and assuring that the rights and welfare of the participants are protected (Qiao, 2018). The IRB reviewed the research design and

procedures, including participant recruitment, informed consent process, and data collection methods to protect participants' rights and welfare. The research design applied in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus groups to gather rich and nuanced data. A purposive sampling strategy selected participants who meet the inclusion criteria and represent diverse backgrounds and perspectives relevant to the research topic. Participants were recruited through dedicated social media platforms, particularly Facebook groups created to support LEO spouses. The researcher shared information about the study, including eligibility criteria and participant requirements, through social media flyers posted in these groups. These flyers also included a link to the eligibility survey. Interested individuals were able to access and complete the survey. Upon survey completion, participants underwent a screening process conducted by the researcher to ensure alignment with the study's criteria. The researcher contacted those who met the criteria and expressed willingness to participate by phone or email to schedule a virtual individual interview. Participants received the information sheet via email a week before the interview. During the initial interview meeting, which served as a rapport-building session, participants were able to ask questions and engage in a dialogue to establish trust and rapport. Trust is essential for understanding the phenomena under study and obtaining rich data. However, participants must recognize that the interviewer's role is that of a data collector, not a therapist (Moyle, 2002). This emphasis on trust and transparency ensured a productive and respectful research environment. Potential participants were provided with comprehensive information about the study's objective, procedures, confidentiality measures, the expected duration of the meetings, and general information about the research study. Participants were informed that their participation is voluntary, and they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. The

information sheet was thoroughly explained during the first meeting and a copy was provided to each participant for their records.

With the permission of each participant, all interviews were recorded for accurate data capture. The audio recordings and identifying information were securely stored in a password-protected external drive exclusively used for this research study. Only the researcher has access to the recordings and data. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym, and any identifying information was removed from the transcripts during transcription. In addition to ensuring participant confidentiality, several ethical considerations were addressed in this study. The researcher created a supportive and safe environment for participants during the interviews and focus groups. Furthermore, potential emotional distress that may arise from discussing sensitive topics was carefully managed, and appropriate referrals to counseling services were made if necessary.

To collect data, the researcher conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus groups, which were audio-recorded with the participant's consent. The interviews were designed to delve into the lived experiences of LEO spouses and uncover their perspectives on various aspects, including their roles, challenges faced, coping strategies utilized, and factors contributing to family well-being and resilience despite the challenges of STS. Each interview was designed to last 60 minutes, allowing for detailed exploration and participant reflection. In addition to individual interviews, focus groups were conducted to facilitate dynamic interactions among LEO spouses. The group discussions were based on key themes identified in the individual interviews, including communication and support, coping strategies, and the impact of stress on family dynamics. Each focus group was made up of four to six participants and last 60 minutes.

The Researcher's Role

The researcher played an active role throughout the research process. The researcher has a background in social sciences and has completed coursework in qualitative research methodologies. Although the researcher has not gained prior experience researching LEO spouses' well-being and resilience, she diligently applied her knowledge and skills to ensure a rigorous and ethical study. The researcher recruited participants from social media platforms, particularly Facebook groups created to support LEO spouses. This process involved reaching out to potential participants and screening participants based on eligibility criteria. The researcher ensured that the recruitment process follows ethical guidelines and maintains participant confidentiality. Once participants were selected, the researcher scheduled and conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions. The researcher utilized active listening skills, established a secure and nurturing setting for participants, and encouraged open and honest dialogue. Understanding the details of what participants express and uncovering hidden meaning was crucial during the interview process. It was important to respond thoughtfully to the conversation and asking relevant questions that move the interview forward (Vandermause & Fleming, 2011). Creating a suitable environment that promotes safety and relaxation was crucial for a successful interview (Baumbusch, 2010). The researcher maintained an unbiased stance throughout the data collection process, ensuring that biases or personal opinions did not influence the participants' responses or the data analysis.

Additionally, the researcher maintained detailed records of the research process, including interview transcripts and relevant documentation. The records were securely stored and only accessible to the researcher to protect the participant's confidentiality and privacy. The

researcher also used pseudonyms to ensure that participant identities remain confidential during data analysis.

Data Collection

This qualitative hermeneutical phenomenological approach explored and understood LEO spouses' roles, experiences, and strategies to foster family well-being and resilience despite STS. The data collection process involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with participants to facilitate a thorough comprehension of the phenomenon being studied. Data for this study was collected through online platforms, specifically using video-conferencing tools such as Zoom, Google Meet, or Teams. An interview guide consisting of open-ended questions was developed to facilitate individual interviews with LEO spouses. According to DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), interview guides are beneficial tools for the most efficient use of interview time as it allows for a systematic and comprehensive exploration of multiple respondents while keeping the interview focused on the desired objectives. The interview guide includes a primary question and several related associated questions, all further refined and improved through pilot testing (Creswell & Poth, 2017). A focus group protocol was utilized to conduct group discussions among LEO spouses, enabling the exploration of collective experiences. As part of the data collection process, observations were made to enrich the qualitative data gathered using these virtual interactions. Specifically, the researcher took note of participants' tone of voice, pauses, response times and any visible non-verbal cues that may be relevant to the research objectives. The verbal and non-verbal communication between the interviewer and interviewee influences the interview process, shaping social interaction (Baumbusch, 2010).

These observations, along with the researcher's reflections and contextual information, were meticulously documented as detailed field notes.

A recruitment announcement was implemented via social media platforms to inform and engage potential participants about the research study. An online announcement effectively included detailed information about the research study (Copeland et al., 2016). This announcement was thoughtfully designed to captivate the interest of prospective participants and encourage their active involvement. It contained comprehensive information about the research study, including its purpose, eligibility criteria, and the advantages of participation. Through this approach, interested individuals encountering the online recruitment announcement found a link to the eligibility survey. By clicking on the link, they were directed to a survey they could complete to determine their eligibility for participation in the study. The survey helped screen potential participants and ensured they fulfilled the minimum participation requirements. In addition to the online announcement, the snowball sampling method was employed to identify and recruit additional participants. The snowball sampling method utilized the existing participants as informants to refer to other individuals with similar characteristics or experiences related to the research topic (Martinez-Mesa et al., 2016). Once individuals expressed their interest and met the eligibility criteria, the researcher contacted each participant to schedule an online interview session. The interviews were conducted in an in-depth, semi-structured format to allow for rich and nuanced data collection.

Following each interview, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Transcription was carried out utilizing transcription software to ensure accuracy and adherence to ethical standards. The collected data was carefully managed to ensure

confidentiality, security, and accessibility throughout the research process. The research data was securely stored in an electronically secured server with password protection, ensuring only authorized personnel could access it. All data was anonymized, and identifying information was securely stored separately from the research data to ensure participant privacy and confidentiality. Multiple strategies were implemented to ensure the quality and validity of the collected data. Data triangulation was employed by using in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Member checking, also called response validation, provides researchers with a method of checking for inconsistencies, challenging assumptions, and allowing participants to provide valuable feedback on the accuracy and interpretation of their data (Anderson, 2010). The validity of research results pertains to the degree to which they accurately portray the intended phenomena. At the same time, the reliability of a study relates to the ability to reproduce the findings (Anderson, 2010).

The collected data was carefully examined through iterative analysis, identifying recurring themes, patterns, and variations. As data saturation was approached, the researcher began to observe repetition and redundancy in the emerging themes, indicating that the significant dimensions of the phenomenon have been thoroughly explored. At the point of data saturation, no new significant insights or themes emerged, ensuring that the study's findings are grounded in a comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon (Saunders et al., 2017).

Interviews

The interviews will use a qualitative hermeneutical approach to gain in-depth insight into LEO spouses' roles, experiences, and strategies to foster family well-being and resilience in the face of STS. Qualitative research commonly employs semi-structured, lightly structured, or in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method (Jamshed, 2014). In alignment with this

approach, the participants in this study engaged in in-depth, semi-structured interviews, allowing for a flexible yet focused exploration of their experiences. These interviews typically ranged from 30 minutes to over an hour, providing ample time for participants to delve into their thoughts, emotions, and perspectives (Jamshed, 2014). Participants were recruited through social media platforms. A purposive sampling ensured a diverse range of experiences and perspectives. The individual interviews and focus groups were conducted in a virtual setting that is conducive and comfortable to establish rapport and encourage open and reflective discussion.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed in alignment with the research questions and relevant methodology (Vandermause & Fleming, 2011). The guide consists of broad, open-ended questions allowing participants to share their perspectives, experiences, and strategies related to the phenomenon of interest. The researcher utilized follow-up questions to delve deeper into specific aspects and ensure comprehensive data collection. Before each interview or focus group session, an information sheet was sent to all participants. Participants were assured of the anonymization and privacy of their identities through pseudonyms. Individual interviews and focus group sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and subsequent verbatim transcription was carried out. Ethical considerations were carefully addressed, and participants were provided with an information sheet explaining the study's purpose, voluntary nature, potential risks, and benefits. The interviews were managed using a secure, password-protected electronic file accessible only to the researcher.

Surveys/Questionnaires

The surveys/questionnaires used in this study were designed to gather rich qualitative data to explore and understand the roles, experiences, and strategies LEO spouses utilize to foster family well-being and resilience in the face of STS. Open-ended and semi-structured questions

were created to elicit detailed narratives and reflections from the participants. The questionnaires delved into LEO spouses' daily challenges, coping strategies, support systems, and strategies employed to promote family well-being and resilience.

Data Analysis

The data collected from this qualitative hermeneutical phenomenological study was subjected to a rigorous and systematic analysis to uncover underlying meanings and essences of the participants' lived experiences. The in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, ensuring an accurate representation of participants' narratives. The data analysis process involved multiple iterative steps, including familiarization with the data, coding identification of themes, and interpretation and patterns and relationships. The researcher read and re-read the transcripts to become familiarized with the content, allowing a comprehensive understanding of the participants' narratives and identifying initial impressions and emerging themes. To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, the researcher engaged in member checking, allowing participants to confirm the accuracy of their transcripts. Pitney and Parker (2009) stated that participant checks can be conducted through two approaches. The first method, known as transcripts verification, involves providing participants with their interview transcripts and requesting them to review them for accuracy. The second strategy, interpretive verification, entails sharing emergent themes and supporting quotes with participants and seeking their feedback on the plausibility of the research findings. These participant checks ensure that the researchers' interpretations align with the participants' perspectives (Pitney & Parker, 2009). The results were organized thematically, highlighting key themes, sub-themes, and variations within the data.

In conclusion, this study's data analysis used Delve, a qualitative analysis software, and employed thematic coding to identify meaningful patterns and themes within the collected data. Through this meticulous and iterative approach, the research aims to gain deeper insight into the lived experience of law enforcement families, understanding their unique challenges and sources of strength. The utilization of Delve enhanced the efficiency and accuracy of the analysis process, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the participants' narratives. The findings from this data analysis contribute to the broader understanding of the impact of stress, coping strategies, and family dynamics within law enforcement families.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the research findings is crucial to establish the credibility and validity of the study. This section employs several strategies and techniques to enhance the trustworthiness of the data analysis and interpretation. These measures contribute to the study's credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability reflexivity (Korstjen & Moser, 2017). To enhance the trustworthiness of this study, the researcher acknowledged personal biases and employed triangulation, a method that involves using multiple data sources and methods to validate the findings. By acknowledging personal biases, the researcher recognized the potential influence of her perspectives and for objectivity and data interpretation. Triangulation further strengthens the study by corroborating findings through diverse data sources and methods, minimizing the risk of bias or isolated conclusions. This approach enhances the study's credibility by establishing the findings' validity.

Moreover, it promotes transferability, allowing for the potential application of the study's outcomes in a similar context. The researcher's commitment to dependability is demonstrated through the meticulous research process and decision-making documentation, ensuring

consistency and accountability. Confirmability is addressed by providing transparent access to the research material and facilitating the auditability of the study by external reviews. By adopting these measures, the study demonstrates a commitment to the principles of trustworthiness, enhancing the overall quality and rigor of the research.

Credibility

To establish the credibility of the findings in this study, rigorous techniques were utilized to ensure the trustworthiness and believability of the data. One such technique is maintaining a sustained presence during the interviews, dedicating enough time to build rapport and establish trust with the participants. As emphasized by Korstjens and Moser (2017), this approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences and ensured their willingness to share their perspectives openly. Additionally, member checking was conducted, whereby participants were allowed to review and validate the accuracy of their interview transcripts. Moreover, an external peer review by the thesis advisor, and an experienced researcher in the field, was sought. According to Anney (2014), peer feedback is essential for enhancing the quality of inquiry findings. Peer debriefing examines various aspects, including background information, data collection methods and processes, data management, transcripts, data analysis procedures, and research findings (Pitney & Parker, 2009). This external validation process involved the advisor critically evaluating the study design, data analysis, and interpretations. Their expertise, unbiased perspective, and feedback provided valuable insights and ensured the rigor of the research.

Dependability and Confirmability

This study adheres to rigorous qualitative research principles by ensuring dependability and confirmability, enhancing the findings' trustworthiness and credibility. According to Guba and Lincoln, as cited by Stahl and King (2020), dependability involves establishing the

consistency and stability of the research process and findings. Confirmability, on the other hand, focuses on the objectivity of the research and the extent to which the researcher's biases influence the results. Reflexivity was practiced, allowing for continuous reflection on personal biases and assumptions that might influence the interpretation of the data. This process involved maintaining a reflective journal to document and critically analyze potential influences on the research process and findings. Dependability and confirmability are essential aspects of this study to ensure the consistency and objectivity of the findings. A systematic and well-documented approach enhanced dependability throughout the research process. This approach includes keeping a detailed audit trail of all decisions, data collection procedures, and analytical processes. Maintaining a clear record of the research steps quickly identified and effectively addressed deviations or modifications.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the ability to generalize findings to other contexts or settings, and researchers can address this by providing rich and detailed descriptions of the research content and participants (Anney, 2014). To enhance the transferability of the findings, this study delved into the role and strategies of LEO spouses in promoting family well-being and resilience as they face symptoms of STS. Providing a comprehensive and detailed description of the research context, participants, and the phenomenon under investigation enhanced the transferability of the findings. The use of thick descriptions in qualitative research enables a comprehensive and detailed portrayal of the participant's experiences, ensuring the transferability of the findings to other study sites and populations (Stahl & King, 2020). Additionally, purposive sampling was utilized to ensure diversity and representativeness in participant selection, ensuring that the selected participants have the necessary characteristics aligned with the research focus, enabling

a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and enhancing the transferability of the findings to similar populations or contexts. By incorporating these strategies, the research aims to enhance the transferability of its findings. It seeks to contribute to a broader comprehension of the role of LEO spouses in promoting family well-being and resilience in the face of STS. Utilizing these strategies strengthens the study's validity and increases its potential impact on supporting law enforcement families.

Ethical Considerations

This research study adhered to ethical guidelines and principles to protect participants' rights and well-being. Participants were provided with a clear outline, including the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, and confidentiality of their information, and were asked for their consent. Participants were informed that they can withdraw from the study at any time without facing any negative consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning pseudonyms to participants and securely storing all data. Ethical considerations are critical when conducting a research study with human participants; therefore, obtaining approval from the Institutional Review ensured compliance with ethical standards (Dibley et al., 2020).

Additionally, the researcher ensured the proper handling, storage, and disposal of data to maintain confidentiality and protect participants' privacy. Throughout the research process, the researcher maintained a professional and respectful relationship with the participants, ensuring their well-being and addressing any concerns or questions that may have arisen during the study. Any conflicts of interest or potential biases were identified and mitigated to maintain the integrity and objectivity of the research.

Chapter Three Summary

This chapter describes the research methodology for this qualitative hermeneutical study. This study used in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus groups to collect data. Ethical considerations were carefully addressed, ensuring that participants provided informed consent and that their confidentiality was protected throughout the research process. The collected data went through a rigorous process using a phenomenological approach, allowing for identifying themes and meanings within the participants' narratives. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, peer review and member checking was conducted to validate the interpretations, and the researcher maintained reflexivity to acknowledge her biases and preconceptions. The researcher's role in maintaining objectivity and managing potential biases was discussed. Moving forward, chapter four presents the findings and analysis based on the data gathered in this qualitative hermeneutical study.

Chapter Four: Findings

Overview Chapter Four delves into the study's findings, presenting the insights gathered from semi-structured in-depth conversations and focus groups with LEO Spouses. This researcher was driven by the aim of understanding how these resilient individuals navigate the challenges associated with their spouses' law enforcement careers. This chapter provides insight into their experiences. The interpretive insights that emerged from the data analysis are explored, offering a foundation for understanding the participants' experiences. Second, remarkable LEO spouses are introduced while protecting their identities with pseudonyms. Lastly, participants' quotes are utilized to illuminate the authenticity of their narratives and address the initial research question.

Participants

The participant recruitment process for this hermeneutical phenomenological study initially targeted individuals from Texas; however, challenges were encountered in securing a sample from this state. The recruitment strategy included posting information about the research study within various Facebook groups dedicated to supporting LEO spouses. The researcher posted the recruitment flyer in eight different Facebook groups, with one Facebook group administrator denying the post. Additionally, the researcher utilized the chat feature, which is an optional feature designed for more private conversations, where available in each Facebook group. Individuals from one specific Facebook group expressed interest, although they did not meet the initial eligibility criteria. The researcher acknowledged that the eligibility criteria needed to be modified to include participants in states within the United States; therefore, the eligibility criteria were modified by submitting a modification to the IRB. Despite multiple efforts across various Facebook groups and modifying eligibility criteria, the response was lower

than anticipated. A total of 18 individuals showed interest in the study and successfully completed the eligibility screening process; however, only seven participants responded to the researcher's email. All seven interviews were scheduled and conducted within the week following the approval from the IRB before starting the busy holiday season. Following each interview, the researcher diligently transcribed the interview utilizing a Microsoft Word document and engaged in the process of familiarization, a crucial step aligned with the principles of phenomenological hermeneutics. This process involved delving into the participants' narratives exploring and interpreting their experiences to achieve a nuanced understanding. The final sample included a diverse sample of six females and one queer-identified individual. The committed participation of these individuals who responded to email invitations and completed semi-structured in-depth Zoom interviews formed the data of this research study. The age range of participants spans from 21 to 57, ensuring a nuanced perspective on experiences across different life stages. This age representation enriches the study, capturing unique insights and responses of individuals at different points in their life journey.

Results

This section presents the emergent themes and patterns derived from the qualitative data. Following a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, this thematic analysis focused on exploring the lived experiences of LEO spouses, seeking insight into the challenges and coping strategies that contribute to family well-being and resilience. The study aims to explore the participants' interpretation of these experiences. Additionally, the researcher's reflexivity is acknowledged, recognizing the potential influence of personal perspective and biases on interpreting participants' narratives.

Theme Development

Theme 1: Psychological Impact of the Job on Officers and Their Spouses

Many emotional and profound psychological challenges accompany the law enforcement career. These accompany not only the officers themselves but also their families, specifically their spouses. Theme 1 delves into the psychological impact experienced by officers and their spouses, shedding light on their emotional challenges. Also, vicarious exposure and the results of secondary traumatic stress are explored, showing the serious effect of a law enforcement career on the officers and their families.

The narratives within this subtheme, *emotional and psychological impact*, reveal the significant psychological and emotional effects accompanied by the law enforcement career. While some participants reported experiencing specific symptoms, others did not share these exact experiences. Those who met their spouses before their law enforcement careers noted observable changes in their partners' personalities. Throughout these narratives, participants shared strategies for navigating their spouse's shifts in personality and mood and coping with nightmares, anxieties, stress, and hyperawareness. This phenomenon of vicarious exposure, where the trauma experienced by others indirectly impacts individuals, is one of the many challenges within law enforcement families. As officers bear witness to the suffering and distress of victims, their loved ones often find themselves struggling with the ripple effects of these encounters. LEO spouses may experience what is known as secondary traumatic stress (STS), a condition characterized by the emotional toll of absorbing the trauma experienced by their partners. While the LEO spouses are not directly involved in the incidents themselves, they are intimately connected to those who are, bearing witness to their pain, their struggles, and their silent battles. In this exploration of vicarious exposure and secondary traumatic stress, the

profound impact that trauma can have on the emotional and psychological well-being of the LEO spouses is uncovered, shedding light on the unknown challenges of the law enforcement career.

Emotional and Psychological Impact

Participants who had been in a relationship with their officer before joining the occupation recounted situations where they observed shifts in their partner's personalities due to the demands and stressors of law enforcement work. This subtheme highlights the spouse's awareness of their officer's changes in behavior, communication, and overall demeanor while navigating career difficulties. Participant 3 provided an insight into her spouse's transformation. She shared that her spouse "was never a very talking" individual before joining the law enforcement career; however, exposure to trauma and sleep deprivation exacerbated emotional withdrawal and compartmentalization. This emotional shift was particularly noticeable, highlighting the toll that the demanding parts of the job took on her spouse's psychological well-being. Reflecting on her partner's personality change, Participant 5 stated, "He is not the same person that I fell in love with." She emphasized the profound changes in his personality over time and stressed a "complete change after a year or so of being in law enforcement." This observation highlights the rapid and significant impact the profession can have on officers' personalities as witnessed by those around them. She continued to share, "he has a much shorter temper now than he used to," emphasizing that he has no anger issues but less tolerance or is easily irritable. Participant 6 shared that she had known her partner for a "decade before he became an officer," emphasizing that she noticed his drastic changes by stating, "It was already mentally and physically exhausting from day one of the academy. I could see emotional changes in him, a lot of frustration, a lot of physical exhaustion." Her perspective adds depth to the narrative, emphasizing the longevity of the relationship and the personality changes observed

throughout his law enforcement career. Participant 3 shared witnessing the emotional changes that she noticed in her spouse by stating, “She was much more easily activated, and she would get frustrated at very little things.” Like other participants, mood changes, particularly irritability, are a challenge that LEO spouses must navigate within their relationship. Participant 5 reflected on the challenges within her relationship by illuminating the strain in communication barriers. She shared that the changes in her officer’s personality “created a lot of communication issues,” adding that she is more vocal about how she feels and communicates her emotions or thoughts to him. The participant acknowledged the difficulties, emphasizing the toll on their relationship dynamic. Following this, Participant 6 recounted a struggle within her relationship, sharing the profound challenge of fostering open communication with her officer. She shared, “He wouldn’t open up. There was nothing I could say to bring him into communication with me.” Despite her attempts for connection, she encountered resistance, illuminating the challenges encountered within law enforcement relationships. Additionally, Participant 3 shared a constant “shutting down or distancing more from anything that would be emotionally evocative.” She reflects, “I mean, when we met, she was starting her law enforcement career, and I was starting my mental health career, so I didn’t know what was happening physiologically, mentally, and emotionally.” She shares, “as those changes occurred, I would take them very personally,” emphasizing that it would create “a lot of friction” within their relationship. She continued to share the difficulties and challenges she experienced within her relationship, and she shared that the only way her spouse knew how to adapt to the career’s demands was by “shutting down and distancing more from anything that would be emotionally evocative.” Adding to this narrative, Participant 5 shared a profound challenge by stating, “emotional disconnect is a big part of it,” making it challenging for her to navigate relationship struggles because “he doesn’t share a lot about his

feelings,” describing his behaviors as “hardened himself to the point he blocks out emotions.”

This narrative shows the barriers to fostering a genuine emotional connection. It is important to note that not all participants could point to such changes, especially those who met their spouses after starting their law enforcement careers. This distinction underscores the varied experiences within law enforcement relationships and the nuanced ways partners navigate the complexities of their officers’ evolving personalities.

Vicarious Exposure and Secondary Traumatic Stress

In the subtheme of vicarious exposure and secondary traumatic stress, participants recount the profound emotional and psychological impact of indirectly witnessing or being exposed to traumatic events through their law enforcement officers. Participant 3 vividly described the weight of her partner’s traumatic encounters, stating, “Watching this play out in my mind and watching what she had to go through and imagining just the pain that she had to put away.” She shares how her partner’s experiences during these critical incidents linger in her thoughts despite not directly experiencing them, highlighting vicarious exposure’s powerful impact. Participant 6 recounts her officer’s emotional burden. She stated it is “heavy on his heart when he explains to me what happened, and it is always with sadness.” Witnessing her partner’s distress becomes a source of emotional strain for her, particularly when confronted with the explicit details of the experiences. She openly shares that her officer often shares “every detail that happens in the call, very explicit, and at least for myself, it is not normal.” She adds that some cases impact her more than others. For example, “when it involves children, it is very difficult for me not to have an emotional feeling about it,” giving her a sense of powerlessness, not being able to do anything for those children or help in any way. Participant 5 reflected on the lasting impression of critical incident images, revealing that the images often get “replayed quite

a bit” in her mind. She also recounted viewing a video of a critical incident shared by her officer, noting how the details of the event “stuck with me for a week or so.” Despite lacking a personal connection to the family involved, she experienced profound sympathy and empathy, leading to random recollections of the incident. Unlike these participants, Participant 4 shared a situation that impacted her by stating, “I always think about it when I go by, and I wonder if he thinks about it too.” In this statement, she shared that her officer told her about a critical situation in a specific location she passed by when driving. It illustrates how the location triggers her, evoking memories of the incident whenever she passes by. It prompts her to ponder whether the site similarly affects her officer. This narrative underscores the enduring impact of vicarious exposure to the traumatic events encountered during her partner’s law enforcement career.

There are times when participants share the need to set boundaries regarding the amount of information they receive, including details of traumatic incidents or sensitive topics related to their partner’s career. Participant 6 openly shared, “I have had to tell him, okay, you do not have to be so explicit in telling me what the injuries look like or how they passed.” She continued to add that she understands this is common for her officer as it is something he does every day; however, “it is a lot to process,” adding that she feels the family’s grief. Additionally, Participant 5 shared, “I am super interested in forensic social work and law enforcement.” She stated she is interested in hearing about critical incidents but “depends on what it is.” These boundaries are necessary for maintaining her emotional well-being and managing the impact of vicarious exposure. Participant 1 remembered when she first married her officer and how much she “loved hearing about everything that happened; it was very exciting.” However, things changed when they “started having kids, and I did not want to hear any of it because it was too dangerous.” She underscored a shift in perspective, noting a change in her emotional response to critical incidents.

However, despite this transformation, she expressed a desire to remain engaged in listening to her officer while acknowledging the impact of work schedules on their time together. Expanding on this, Participant 7 shared the significance of clearly communicating boundaries, stating, “if you hear stories about calls, you can say, I do not want to hear that,” highlighting a crucial aspect of self-awareness and boundary setting. This acknowledgement serves as a recognition of when the situations shared by one’s officer begin to impact personal well-being.

Not all participants are equally affected by the critical incidents shared by their officers. Participant 7 provided insight by stating, “I have seen pictures and videos. It does not bother me. It probably should, but I am desensitized to that.” She attributes her resilience to her job-related experiences. She identifies herself as someone who does not experience the same worry as others, remarking, “I feel like a lot of people probably have the same view of it as me.” Similarly, Participant 3 shared, “I have always been less impacted by the stories,” linking her ability to cope with attributing this resilience to her past childhood trauma.

Participant 3 offered insight into the profound stress endured during 2020, remarking, “All of 2020 was extremely stressful for both of us.” The events profoundly impacted first responders like her officer, who was at the forefront of these situations. Furthermore, Participant 3 shared that her officer “gets very anxious and on edge,” highlighting the toll those situations and other job demands have taken on her emotional well-being. Participant 6 stated, “So the danger is still there, the worrisome will always be. For every other officer, we know firsthand what they put themselves through.” She acknowledges the potential dangers officers face daily, contributing to heightened anxieties for LEO spouses. Similarly, Participant 4 reflected on the dangers her officer confronts, stating, “and I know that he is in danger every day,” acknowledging, “I do not get upset about having to be by myself because I know I could be by

myself in the blink of an eye.” This reflection illustrates her resilience in navigating the emotional challenges stemming from the risks associated with the job.

In discussing secondary traumatic stress, Participant 2 highlighted its profound impact by stating, “Secondary trauma runs deep when you have two parents that are first responders.” She emphasizes the toll of STS on her children, especially within her household where both parents are first responders. Additionally, Participant 2 recounted an incident at her home that exemplifies hyperawareness. She openly shares, “he is always the calm one. Well, that day, he was not, and you could tell he was immediately on edge, and he grabbed the water hose like a loaded pistol.” She vividly described a moment when her typically composed officer displayed visible signs of distress with “instinctive reaction” to a recent tragic event he had responded to involving a child. The heightened response prompted “a lockdown review of gun safety,” emphasizing that they “take gun safety very seriously.” Through these narratives, the profound influence of traumatic events on officer’s behaviors and their families.

Theme 2: Navigating Challenging Shift Work

The law enforcement career demands irregular work schedules, leaving LEO spouses to navigate the disruption of daily routines. Participants expressed the challenges imposed by their LEO spouse’s irregular work schedule on various aspects of their lives, impacting their marriage, disrupting daily routines, and challenges adapting to the work schedules. One subtheme that emerged from participants’ discussions was the impact of irregular shifts on their marriage. Participants expressed how these unbalanced schedules disrupted their quality time with their officer. They highlighted the challenges of having endless late calls or never having the same days off, leading to a constant battle of different needs because of the demanding and extended work hours. The irregular and unpredictable law enforcement work schedules add complexity to

the daily lives of the officers and their families. This subtheme, *emotional and physical well-being during shift changes*, explores the unique challenges irregular shifts present, bringing to light the emotional and physical toll that both the officer and their partners take. In addition to the strain on marital challenges and emotional and physical well-being caused by irregular schedules, the theme *disruption of daily routines* emphasizes the participant's expression of daily routines and socially connected disruptions. Some challenges faced are maintaining religious commitments, expressing frustration at being unable to engage in church activities, and highlighting that connecting with others become challenging, not because of physical distance but because of time constraints. Participants revealed instances where their partner's career demands disrupted holiday traditions, leading to celebrations on alternative days or the inability to prepare for the holidays. Moreover, participants discussed the ongoing struggle of juggling their careers and educational pursuits alongside the demands imposed by their partner's profession.

Impact of Irregular Shift on Marriage

One significant subtheme from participants' discussions was the *impact of irregular shifts* on their marriage. Participant 5 and Participant 3 highlighted the challenges of disturbed schedules, sharing the difficulties in fostering meaningful connections when physical presence is limited. Participant 5 stated, "disturbed schedules, it's really hard to have quality time with your law enforcement officer when you don't see them." Participant 3 stated, "I miss her because I can't spend time with her." "We're not gonna spend quality time together for like a month... some old kind of struggles are coming back to me because we haven't been able to spend any quality time together for the past three weeks." These statements capture the impact of disrupted schedules on the participants' ability to share quality moments with their partners. Participant 3's

narrative delved into the emotional toll of extended periods without quality time: “We had opposite needs, you know, when she would come off shift, she would desperately need some alone time, and I would desperately need together time, and it became this constant battle.” She emphasized the recurrence of challenges when schedules disrupt the opportunity for shared moments, shedding light on the intricacies of conflicting needs within relationships affected by irregular schedules. Furthermore, Participant 6 stated, “it started affecting our home in the frustration of the endless late calls, instead of getting out at ten o’clock. It was always the latest, I think, 3:30 in the morning. There was just exhaustion.” This statement reflects the frustration stemming from the unpredictability of extended shifts and her observation that “it was taking a mental and physical exhaustion on him, and his frustrations were coming here at home.” She articulated the toll the demanding work schedules impact her partner, both mentally and physically. She emphasized that his frustration affected their home life, affecting their relationship by having little patience with her and the children, causing situations to escalate unnecessarily.

The impact of irregular work schedules on marital dynamics concerns participants. Participant 1 reflected on the challenges of aligning their different schedules by stating, “scheduling issues where I’m working during the day and he’s working at night.” The need to find equilibrium within their schedules results in a feeling of disconnect. Participant 6 described feeling like “roommates” wanting to interact with each other but feeling exhausted at the end of the day. Participant 7 added depth to this narrative, highlighting the toll of opposite shifts where “we wouldn’t see each other,” creating a sense of loneliness. The desire for consistent work schedules highlights how irregular schedules strain marital connections, leaving spouses struggling with emotional distance and longing for greater connection.

Emotional and Physical Well-being During Shift Changes

Within this subtheme, we delve deeper into how the demanding work schedules extend beyond marital relationships, impacting the emotional and physical well-being of the LEO spouses. Participant 5 provided an honest reflection on irregular work shifts, acknowledging the physical toll during transitional periods by expressing, “my body sometimes struggles,” emphasizing the challenges her body goes through during the shift transitions. In addition to the physical strain described by Participant 5, Participant 3 expressed a profound sense of disconnection and isolation: “I feel disconnected, really isolated, but I also isolate myself more because I haven’t spent time with her.” Further isolating herself highlights the toll it takes on her well-being. This withdrawal underlines the emotional journey she navigates, revealing a sense of disconnection and isolation as she navigates the daily challenges that come with her spouse’s irregular work schedules. Participant 7 mentioned her ongoing struggles with insomnia, a challenge exacerbated by her spouse’s night shifts. She said, “the night shift is harder for me because I work in the morning and have insomnia.” This perspective adds a deeper understanding of the complexities accompanying her spouse’s night shifts.

Disruption of Daily Routines

The irregular and unpredictable law enforcement work schedules add challenges to the daily lives of the officers and their families. This subtheme explores the disruption of daily routines. Participants openly shared their struggles in maintaining consistent daily activities, as the unpredictability of the irregular work shift presents many daily disruptions. Participant 5 provided a touching example related to religious commitments by sharing being unable to be “super involved in the church because our schedules kind of make it impossible to be.” Despite

the deep spiritual devotion, the demanding nature of their schedules affects not only her involvement but also her partner's ability to engage fully in church activities.

Moreover, Participants 5 and 6 highlighted the constant efforts to balance their careers and educational pursuits amidst the demands of their partner's profession. Participant 5 shares the challenges and additional responsibilities of "working full time and being in school full time." Participant 6 shared the impact on her career goals as her spouse pursued his law enforcement career. However, being unexpectedly recruited by law enforcement "threw a curveball" causing her to extend the timeline for her career aspirations. Despite this, she prioritizes her supportive role in navigating the irregular work shifts. While managing personal and professional responsibilities, Participant 4 candidly shared a specific instance where the demands of her partner's irregular shift disrupted a cherished holiday tradition by stating, "we didn't get Christmas shopping done." Despite the significance of holiday traditions, Participant 7 expressed a different perspective: "We never celebrate holidays on holidays." She stresses that this "was not an adjustment" for her, having been a part of the first responder culture even before meeting her husband.

Theme 3: Navigating Lack of Support

Understanding the various challenges within the law enforcement career is crucial for implementing appropriate support systems. The theme of *navigating lack of support* explores LEO spouses' challenges when seeking support, both within and outside the organization. While officers experience a transition period during their training, facilitating a transition from civilian to officer role, this transition is not an option for their families, particularly their spouses. The lack of preparation often leads to early career struggles that spouses are unprepared for, affecting interpersonal relationships.

Challenges in Seeking Support

One of the biggest challenges the participants shared is the inability to communicate with close family members or friends, limiting the external support they receive. Participant 5 shared having a solid connection with her family, particularly with her grandmother, and finding it difficult to share details of possible internal struggles she might be experiencing. She stated, “I don’t go into details about things that he tells me or that I know he experienced at work when I am talking to my mom, brother, or grandma.” Although it is common for LEO spouses to not share information outside of their marriage, specific details about a case, there is an internal struggle of feeling misunderstood by those who do not fully understand the law enforcement culture and its impact on the family. Participant 5 shared, “friends and family members who aren’t familiar with the law enforcement life don’t understand the responsibility, they do not understand the stress of, he may not come home today, or this may be the phone call.” She continued to share about “the phone call” that everyone dreads, the call that communicates “he’s been shot, he’s been hurt, he’s in the hospital, he’s not coming home.” She shared her experience of a similar situation happening in the past and the burden she feels when thinking that tomorrow might be completely different if something were to happen to her officer. Participant 3 shared accepting and “wrapping my head around this life,” understanding her strength and resilience rather than seeking “support from people who can’t” while also being mindful and cautious of “how much I share with other spouses or partners because I know, that they can’t understand.” Ultimately, Participant 2 emphasized that “most people don’t understand, and it’s hard for non-first responders to understand what the hell we do in the first place.” Within these narratives, the participants share their experiences of not being understood and being put in a situation where they’ve accepted the significant role of active listeners, carrying the problems and stress, hoping

to alleviate from their officer while also being cautious about sharing their feelings with others due to often feeling misunderstood.

Regarding the level of support they receive from other law enforcement families, the participants stated it was minimal. Many resort to social media groups such as Facebook groups specifically to support law enforcement families. However, even often, when seeking support through this social media platform, Facebook groups may be more harmful. Participant 2 emphasized, “if you say one word wrong on Facebook,” the feedback provided from other LEO partners might be more damaging than helpful; for this reason, she is avoiding participation in the posts. Following with a similar situation, Participant 3 shared being a part of Facebook groups for a couple of years; however, she “never participates” as she doesn’t “find them effective,” even after reading the posts and attempting to relate to some of the stories and sympathize with the situation. Participant 1 shared her thoughts on the social media posts by noting that many law enforcement spouses seek support from others when it should be prioritized “to tell their spouses” about these feelings and engage in healthy communication in their marriage. Although multiple Facebook social media groups are designed to support LEO spouses, it sounds like it can be counteractive due to the possible negative responses. Even navigating the complexities of seeking support within law enforcement circles presents unique challenges for spouses. Participant 3 expressed, “I’ve never had a big LEO support.” Despite some officers forming connections, both Participant 5 and Participant 6 recount instances where their officers have received misguided advice regarding family matters. Participant 6 recalls hearing advice like, “You don’t need your family. “Everyone ends up getting a divorce,” while Participant 5 shared her partner’s reluctance to marry, influenced by the stigma around law enforcement marriages ending in divorce. The advice given and the prevalent

skepticism about law enforcement marriages suggest that family is dispensable and often leads to divorce, reflecting a concerning perspective within the law enforcement culture. Although part of a close-knit community of law enforcement friends, sharing marital problems or challenges may prove difficult. Participant 7 candidly expressed her reservation, stating, “I don’t want to tell my friends that work with him,” expressing concerns about how it might impact their professional relationship with her husband. This participant recognizes the importance of camaraderie among law enforcement families yet has concerns about confidentiality and privacy.

Organizational Support

The complicated organizational support incorporates a narrative that echoes the challenges officers, and their families navigate. Participant 6 shed light on the demanding nature of the organization, illustrating how officers are compelled to stay on duty for extended hours, sacrificing special time with their families. She underscores the indifferent stance of the department, emphasizing, “even though it takes 12 or 13 hours away from your family to us as a department, we don’t care.” Although this is not a direct statement made by the organization to this participant, it is her interpretation of the department’s demands based on her experience. This reality reflects the organizational disregard that is indifferent to officers’ families’ well-being, affecting their family dynamic. Participant 3’s experience reveals the challenges of seeking support from friends outside the law enforcement community who struggle to comprehend “How the department gets away with working our spouses.” The constant need to explain and justify the department’s policies hinders their ability to provide meaningful support. She continues to illustrate a recent challenge by emphasizing the organization’s demanding expectations on officers without consideration for their overall well-being. She states, “For the last three weeks, she was working 19-hour shifts, basically, and getting about two-and-a-half

hours of sleep, which is not sustainable or healthy, is abusive, quite frankly.” This narrative sheds light on the organization’s role in creating a work environment that not only risks the health of its officers but also amplifies the burden placed on the families who must navigate these demanding circumstances with minimal support. Participant 5 mentioned, “as far as I know, they don’t do a lot for spouses,” sharing her observation that the organization does not support spouses, highlighting a crucial void in resources and assistance. Participant 3 further articulated a feeling of disconnection from the law enforcement community, emphasizing, “I have never really felt connected to the community.” Having trouble forming bonds with other law enforcement families due to lacking support creates a sense of isolation beyond our imagination. Participants have shared struggles in seeking support from non-law enforcement families, highlighting the vital role of organizational support in developing a sense of community among law enforcement families. Participant 6 delved deeper into the narrative, emphasizing the crucial need for resources tailored to officers and their families. She understands that “a strong family foundation will lead to successful officers.” Emphasizing that supporting the family is a protective factor against the psychological toll of the job, reducing “suicides and domestic violence, and increasing overall positive turnaround.” She adds a delicate topic that is often discussed but affects many families. Participant 6 mentioned a high rate of suicide among officers within her officer’s department. She believes it’s due to the lack of resources for the officers and their families. Participant 5 and Participant 6 highlight a positive change when officers transition to smaller units, emphasizing family and unity among the officers, suggesting that smaller units may foster a more supportive environment, recognizing families’ critical role in an officer’s well-being. The findings underscore the critical impact of organizational support,

or the lack thereof, on the intricate dynamics of law enforcement families, revealing a complex dynamic between professional demands and familial well-being.

Theme 4: Perceived Roles and Responsibilities

Several subthemes came to light within this overreaching theme of *perceived roles and responsibilities*, focusing on the roles taken by LEO spouses to promote family well-being and resilience by balancing multiple roles within the family dynamic, providing significant and impactful unseen contributions to their officer and embrace towards the law enforcement culture. The subtheme, *balancing multiple responsibilities*, highlights a profound sense of duty and responsibility as expressed by one participant who postpones her tasks to prioritize caring for her officer. Participants navigate the challenges of their officer's demanding careers with empathy and poise. They internalize the responsibility to support them by taking on childcare and additional home responsibilities to alleviate their officers' mental and physical exhaustion. Delving deeper into the experiences of LEO spouses, the *unseen contributions in spousal role* explores the participants' strong sense of purpose in their roles as supportive LEO spouses. This purpose extends beyond traditional roles and responsibilities, as it becomes a commitment to ensuring the officer's well-being and success in their demanding careers. Participants acknowledge the challenges of being a wife, parent, and professional, yet they emphasize a deeper layer of difficulty associated with being a LEO spouse. This acknowledgment adds depth to their narratives, portraying their awareness of their unique situation and their resilience to navigate these challenges.

In the subtheme of *embracing law enforcement culture*, we delve into the participants' sense of pride and embracement of the law enforcement culture. In expressing pride for their spouses' law enforcement careers, participants balance embracing the law enforcement culture

while safeguarding their identities. Unlike the stereotypes of typical LEO spouses who may constantly display the thin blue line or introduce themselves solely to their officer's name or rank, these participants take pride in their officer's career in a way that preserves their unique identities. Participants also demonstrate resilience in upholding that pride in the face of societal criticisms.

Balancing Multiple Responsibilities

Participant 5's narrative offered a profound glimpse into the complex balance that characterizes the lives of LEO spouses. The participant articulated the weight she carries in managing her personal and professional responsibilities, acknowledging the challenges in prioritizing her duties while caring for her partner. She shared, "just knowing I have all these things to do, and I, too, am bad about sometimes putting off my responsibilities to take care of him." This participant provided a determined support and understanding. She navigates the complexity of her officer's work demands gracefully and empathetically, putting her professional and personal responsibilities at the end. She emphasized that she "understand his work schedule and his stress, too." "So, I think just knowing how exhausted he is mentally and physically just kind of gives me this internal responsibility of, hey, you have to take care of him because his job is really hard." She recognized the challenges and demands accompanied by his career, showing deep care and connection to the well-being of her officer.

To manage her household responsibilities effectively, Participant 5 relied on a systematic approach by maintaining a "checklist." She stressed the distinct division of roles, articulating, "I'm taking care of our home. All he has to do is work and come home." To ensure her partner's undivided focus on the demands of the job and to prioritize his safety, Participant 5 strategically postponed her own personal and professional responsibilities. By taking care of the home

responsibilities, she allowed her officer to concentrate solely on work, ensuring he can dedicate all his energy to the challenges of his job and ensure his safety. Participant 4 captured this dedication, expressing a willingness to “take on the responsibility that is required” to ensure each day of work is as smooth as possible. Participant 7 echoed this sentiment by emphasizing the dynamic nature of her support role. She actively engages in various ways to make her officer’s “life easier,” recognizing that his needs and challenges can change daily. This adaptability demonstrates the participant’s commitment to providing assistance and understanding the changing needs of her spouse. Participant 3 candidly shared feeling “quite tired” and exhausted due to taking on her usual responsibilities and those of her officer. With this statement, she shared the added burden of managing her tasks and shouldering the responsibilities typically handled by her officer. The participant’s admission of feeling quite tired underscores the impact of the occupation on the distribution of household duties and the pivotal role LEO spouse plays in supporting their officer’s overall well-being.

Not all participants shared the responsibility of raising children. Four participants indicated a commitment to caring for children at home. Participant 1 elaborated on the challenges, noting instances where she had to “take off work if they were sick,” effectively assuming the “responsibility of both parents” due to her officer’s absence. Participant 4 reflected on the sacrifices made during her children’s younger years, emphasizing the weight of “accepting the responsibility” to ensure her family’s functionality. Looking back, she expressed a sense of fulfillment as she observed her family thriving. She clarified that the sacrifices were not for her benefit but for her officer and their family thriving. This statement reflects her prioritization of her spouse’s and family’s needs over personal considerations, demonstrating a deep commitment to supporting her officer and promoting family well-being. Participant 6

candidly shared the challenges of managing a cherished and demanding schedule. Juggling roles as a mother, wife, and student, she asks, “Where is my time? Where do I fall into this?” This narrative captures the multiple responsibilities that LEO spouses navigate.

Participant 2 underscored the isolated nature of these additional responsibilities, particularly without extended family support. The statement, “it would become very stressful because I do not have any family near” resonates with the challenges of balancing family, personal, and professional responsibilities. Adding to this narrative, Participant 5 shared her contemplation on starting a family in the future, revealing a thoughtful approach shaped by insights from other LEO spouses. While looking forward to parenthood, she acknowledges the challenges shared by other LEO spouses who describe feeling like “single parents.” Despite the physical presence of their officers at home every day, the demands of irregular work schedules and the emotional toll of the job can create a sense of unavailability. These concerns weigh on Participant 5, as it has been “stressing me out” as it is an ongoing conversation with her officer.

Unseen Contributions in Spousal Role

LEO spouses’ unseen but vital role in supporting their officers is having a sense of purpose. Participant 6 expressed a profound belief in a higher purpose, reflecting on obtaining her strength and purpose from religious beliefs that assist in navigating the challenges associated with the law enforcement career. She states, “so I believe I have a purpose, and God sent me in his life for a reason.” With this statement, she expressed frustration about not knowing the exact nature of this purpose; however, she maintains faith in her role in her officer’s life.

Acknowledging a divine purpose brings the participant’s perspective to light, suggesting a religious approach to her role in supporting her officer. Building on her spiritual belief,

Participant 6 reflected on her role as a LEO spouse and questions the level of support she gives her officer. She often reflected,

What am I doing wrong? How can I support him better? How can I take all this frustration and issues he is going through away from him? So, I want to be the problem solver, help him, and take over, and I wish I could take everything away from him that's stressing him.

The participant's reflection reveals a commitment within her law enforcement relationship, emphasizing her strong sense of duty to her officer. She wishes to shield her officer from the stressors and difficulties that follow the demanding occupation. Participant 3 expressed her profound sense of purpose in supporting her officer spouse, emphasizing her "purpose is to be as supportive, loving and available as possible." Her words reflect commitment and dedication, highlighting LEO spouses' commitment and responsibility in nurturing their relationships and ensuring her officer's well-being and success in the law enforcement career amidst challenges.

Participants shed light on the ongoing and often unnoticed support they provide within their relationships. Participant 6 reflected on the continuous role of "being a support system since the beginning" of their relationship, a commitment that has persisted for 15 years, even as her officer's career has changed. This unseen support has become an integral part of her everyday life. This feeling is reflected by Participant 4, who emphasized normalizing her role, expressing difficulty recognizing a clear distinction between her "normal" and what might be considered traditional. This realization indicates that her contributions and support have become ingrained in her daily life that they feel ordinary. Participant 2 added a layer to this narrative by acknowledging the initially perceived absurdity of certain aspects of the LEO spouse roles but

later realizing “we kind of do it organically, or otherwise fall into it.” The organic, almost natural incorporation of these roles speaks to the often-overlooked ways spouses seamlessly integrate supportive actions into their relationships.

Being a supportive listener emerges as an essential role, demonstrating an invaluable way for officers to navigate the complexities of their careers. Participant 6 provided insights into her supportive role, acknowledging, “it takes a lot of time and patience and being receptive to things that he tells me,” while recognizing the need to consider her responses carefully. The participant expresses that her officer’s primary desire is “to be listened to, to let him vent, which helps him feel much better.” She emphasized this approach has a positive impact on her officer’s well-being. Participant 5 similarly recognized the significance of providing emotional support through attentive listening, acknowledging, “this is a way I can support him emotionally.” Participant 1 highlighted her role as a supportive listener by acknowledging that there are moments when her officer shares aspects of his work. During these conversations, her primary role is to listen. She shared, “I am a pretty good listener, so when he needs to talk about something, he just needs me to sit and listen.” She recognizes her strengths as a good listener, a valuable quality to support her officer in navigating the complexities of the law enforcement career. She added, “so, he is talking to me about stuff, and I am not supposed to say anything about it.” This statement emphasizes that her officer often confides in her about work-related matters, and there was an understanding that she would not share with anyone else, either in or out of the law enforcement community.

In addition to being attentive and supportive listeners, the participants demonstrate a profound understanding of the importance of providing their officers with the space to share at their own pace. Participant 7 highlighted the significance of allowing her officer the “time for

transition.” She noted that during this period, she respects his need to decompress, allowing him to decide when and how he wants to discuss any challenges he may be willing to share.

Participant 4 described her approach to communication with her officer, acknowledging the inconsistency in his willingness to open, “if you want to talk about it, fine.” This approach demonstrates the importance of being available to talk when needed and recognizing when to give the officer the autonomy to initiate discussions. Participant 7 emphasized the significance of supporting her officer “without being overbearing.” This highlights the importance of allowing him the space and time to process his feelings at his own pace. The participant underscores the value of recognizing when “not to push for information and allowing him to share on his terms.” The participant’s ability to navigate this fine line reflects a critical understanding of the emotional needs of their officers, demonstrating a supportive approach that goes beyond listening.

Embracing Law Enforcement Culture

As the participants shared their experiences with perceived roles and responsibilities, a profound sense of pride and commitment emerged, a fulfillment that overcomes the challenges and biases associated with the law enforcement career. Participant 4 passionately expressed, “it is an honorable profession, and I am proud of him.” She emphasized the significance of her officer’s work, sharing, “he has done some really neat things, and he got an amber baby girl alert, which is cool.” She shares this impactful moment as proof of the meaningful impact law enforcement can have. Participant 2 expressed feeling “always proud of him and his accomplishments.” This enduring pride underscores the participant’s admiration for her officer’s achievement.

The participant's narrative echoes the sentiment that being a part of the law enforcement family is more than a role; it is an honorable calling that these spouses actively embrace.

However, being an advocate for law enforcement comes with its own set of challenges.

Participant 2 candidly shared the burden of being the "spokesperson and cheerleader," nothing the constant need to present a positive image. She reflects on the future, saying, "I do not want him to be viewed negatively." She shared that she acknowledges the societal assumptions about law enforcement families and the pressure to conform to a specific image. By portraying a positive image of her officer to others, she needs to "overcompensate" to break down stereotypes, ensure a positive perception of her officer, and navigate societal expectations.

In navigating the societal perceptions surrounding the law enforcement career, participants express the challenges of being perceived as representatives of their officers. Participant 7 reflected on her role as an extension of her officer in certain settings, highlighting the awareness of the sense of responsibility that comes with being viewed as an "extension of him." Meanwhile, Participant 2 shed light on the burdensome expectations of being a LEO spouse, feeling compelled by the "expectation to constantly represent the law enforcement community and the perceived loss of individual voice and opinion in the process," sacrificing personal opinions and expressions. Participant 6 acknowledged the struggles associated with "negative media" portrayals and societal biases, recognizing the need to be "respectful of their opinions" about law enforcement. Moreover, Participant 2 addresses the stigma surrounding the role of police officers, the misconception that they only serve the interests of certain societal groups or, "the stigma that police officers are only here for the good people in society." Finally, Participant 1 shared a narrative describing the impact of societal perceptions on the children of

law enforcement families, emphasizing the detrimental effects of stereotype-based assumptions heard in schools by peers.

Theme 5: Family Resilience

Within this overarching theme of *family resilience* three related subthemes emerged, each bringing light on specific resilience characteristics within law enforcement families. These subthemes, *resilience through independence*, *communication*, and *adaptation to law enforcement culture*, reveal LEO spouses' experiences, challenges, and resilience as they withstand the unique pressures of law enforcement careers. In pursuing resilience, participants find strength in fostering individual autonomy and self-identity. The subtheme, *resilience through independence*, explores the narratives of LEO spouses who, while deeply committed to their law enforcement officers, carve out space for personal growth and independence. Their stories show the balance between being supportive and maintaining a distinct, resilient sense of self. Open and honest communication fosters family resilience within law enforcement relationships. This subtheme, *resilience through communication*, delves into the dynamics of effective communication and how families navigate challenges, resolve conflicts, and foster understanding. Law enforcement culture presents a unique set of challenges and demands, requiring families to adapt and evolve. This subtheme, *adaptation to law enforcement culture*, explores the unique challenges associated with law enforcement and the ability to adapt to the law enforcement culture and demands of this profession, which is a form of resilience.

Resilience Through Independence

Within the family dynamic, maintaining individual identity, upholding personal boundaries, and fostering self-reliance emerge as an essential foundation of resilience, strengthening the family unit. This resilience not only supports each family member as an

individual but also contributes to the overall well-being and cohesion of the entire family. Participant 3 shared, “when we both were able to care for ourselves better, our relationship naturally improved.” She recognized that a positive change happened within the relationship when both partners prioritized self-care. By investing time and effort into their individual needs, a stronger connection within their relationship was found. Participant 5 captured this essence, noting “we just do our own thing.” This statement reflects on the decision to navigate the demands of the law enforcement career by understanding the need for individual time with family and friends to seek support, which is crucial in navigating STS. Participant 6 recognized the conscious choice to support her partner’s career while prioritizing personal well-being. She asserted, “even though he chose this career, I don’t necessarily have to put myself through the stress because that is something he chose,” highlighting the distinction between supporting her officer and sacrificing one’s peace. Participant 1 echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the importance of “being your person,” stressing that individuality becomes an act of resilience. Participant 7 emphasized preserving her sense of self amid her officer’s career demands: “So, just making sure my identity is not wrapped up in him. By any means,” she reflected. “I have my own life; I am my own person,” she stated. She explained that maintaining autonomy, particularly in the workplace, ensured her partner’s profession did not overshadow her individuality. She shared that she kept her maiden name as she “wanted to make sure people knew me for me,” particularly in a professional setting where she previously worked within her officer’s agency.

However, pursuing individuality faced unique challenges within the law enforcement dynamic. Participant 3 expressed that to “have a meaningful, valuable, loving, supportive relationship as I want, I’m going to have to find a way to make more space for her to exist

separately,” something that she wholeheartedly shared being “really hard” to do as the “job itself separates” them immensely. This intentional separation serves as a foundation for the relationship to thrive by actively nurturing the freedom and agency of her significant other. It’s a delicate balance to find autonomy within a profession that demands sacrifice. Participant 6 shared, “setting time aside” and often being “mindful” of their time together, “valuing the time that we have.” Carving out time for themselves and each other demonstrates maintaining their identity and self-care practices while prioritizing their relationship.

Resilience Through Communication

Open and honest communication fosters family resilience within law enforcement families. This subtheme delves into the dynamics of effective communication and how families navigate challenges, resolve conflicts, and foster understanding. Participant 7 emphasized the crucial “skill of communication,” highlighting the power vocalizing positive and negative emotions. She highlighted that “the biggest support comes from both of us” towards each other, stemming from open communication, especially when “struggling.” She emphasized the significance of receiving support within their relationship. This sentiment resonated with Participant 6, who stated, “whether it’s positive or negative, vocalize it.” She echoed the acknowledgment and emphasized the need to express positive and negative emotions openly. Participant 3 shared that an emotional hurdle was the “resentment and frustration toward the other,” which she described as “creating such a block” in their communication, affecting their relationship. Based on the narratives, a common challenge in communication within law enforcement relationships is that law enforcement officers are not fully open to discussing what they are going through. Participant 3 shared her officer is “able to compartmentalize and feel a real sense of duty to listen more so than talk.” Following this statement, Participant 6 stated she

“appreciates him just having communication because for a long time he wouldn’t open up.”

Participant 5 reflected on and accepted communication challenges; therefore, she acknowledged

that “nonverbal communication is just as good as verbal communication in our situation.” This

showed the importance of giving her officer space to talk as he needs to. Participant 3

emphasized the importance of acknowledging when to “get out of the way” as she described her

initial approach as a “tug of war” but later understood the importance of “remove the pressure”

and realizing it was a slow process and revisiting tough conversations or having tough

conversations later rather than pushing for answers now. Participant 3 contributed to this

narrative by stressing the importance of transparent communication. She shared her proactive

approach of setting “out a time that we can come back to it,” fostering an environment where

both the officer and spouse can agree on a suitable time to revisit challenging discussions.

Participant 5 reinforced the significance of communication by stating, “we have to be at a place

where we are both okay to walk away and then come back to it later when we feel like we can.”

This emphasized the necessity of being in a mental space where both individuals can walk away

and return to the conversation when they feel better prepared. The commitment to open and

honest communication was further highlighted by the efforts to “work as a team,” gradually

overcoming the emotional barriers through mutual understanding and appreciation towards each

other. Participant 5 noted that achieving this level of communication “took a lot of time, effort,

and determination.” Participant 6 echoed, “that’s a beautiful marriage, you know, ups and downs,

but that’s what marriage is for.” She described the ups and downs of marriage as beautiful,

emphasizing the need for teamwork to overcome challenges. Participant 6 also noted that such

progress “took a lot of work.” She described the communication struggles she has experienced

within her marriage and her efforts to provide a comfortable space for her officer as she stated,

“I’ve learned to have him come home, greet him, being as positive as I can, even though I had a rough day, like as positive as I can.”

Adaptation to the Law Enforcement Culture

A pivotal aspect of adaptation is acceptance. Participant 3 articulated, “we accept that these changes are going to occur,” and emphasized the need to “work together to counteract as much as possible.” Embracing change, understanding it as an inevitable part of the law enforcement culture, and collaboratively navigating it with a sense of control alongside one’s partner contributes to the resilience of their relationship. Participant 3 reflected on the initial sense of “unfairness” when grappling with the difficulties of her partner’s career, leading to feelings of being “dragged along” and harboring “resentment.” However, this evolved into a profound realization that “no one is forcing me to stay in this relationship.” This viewpoint highlights the importance of actively countering challenges and taking ownership of one’s choices within the relationship. Participant 4 provided an interesting perspective, emphasizing the inevitability of certain responsibilities that are part of the law enforcement culture. She asserted, “you can complain all you want, but you will still have to do it. Not because you have to, but because you want to do it.” This candid acknowledgment delves into the commitment to navigate these challenges, which stems from a genuine desire and choice. Participant 3 further delved into the complex emotions tied to her partner’s career choice. She recounted the internal struggle, ruminating on questions like “why are you choosing this?” and expressing frustration at the perceived unfairness. She acknowledged feeling “stuck” in a “toxic place,” recognizing the toxicity of these thoughts and realizing that while her officer chose this career, she too, was making a “mindful choice” to stay in the relationship. This realization helped transform her relationship, allowing her to let go of the resentment and commit to nurturing the relationship.

Participant 6 echoed this sentiment, recognizing that not everything was within her control, especially concerning her partner's career. She emphasized, "I don't necessarily have to put myself through the stress because that is something he chose." This recognition is key to accepting circumstances beyond personal control, acknowledging challenges, willingly accepting and adapting, and demonstrating determination and resilience. Participant 5 underscored a crucial point by noting what she has heard from other LEO spouses: "You are new to this life for the first five or so years." This statement highlights the gradual nature of adaptation to law enforcement culture, as it is not instantaneous. The initial years may be challenging, even shocking, but after the initial period, there is an expectation and hope that arises that the challenges will become manageable. Participant 5 expressed a sense of having "gotten more adjusted to this life," focusing on personal growth while supporting her officer. She shared a hopeful view, expressing the belief that things "will get easier" over time. This statement reflects acknowledging challenges, acceptance, and an optimistic outlook on overall mental well-being and relationship improvement. Adding to this narrative, Participant 6 shared, "I am growing more; his happiness make me happy," emphasizing their profound connection and love. She added that she frequently looks "forward to the little positive changes" in their lives, embracing and finding joy in these moments.

Adding to the point of growth and adaptation, Participant 4 provided a unique perspective by highlighting her years of experience as an LEO spouse. Having been in this role for "so long" she admitted that she does not understand the distinction between what is considered "normal" in a marriage, highlighting that the demands of the law enforcement career have been ingrained in her daily life. She emphasized, "this is normal for me." Participant 4 also shared that the challenges of the law enforcement career don't negatively impact her temperament or the

dynamics of her marriage. She stated, “we grew up together,” suggesting a shared journey of adaptation and resilience within the family as the years passed. Within this reflection, Participant 4 asserted that adapting to the changes has become integral to her life, emphasizing, “it’s just a natural thing after doing it this long.” This perspective demonstrates that as an LEO spouse, the challenges become more manageable with time, showing an increased ease of adaptation.

Participant 7 drew from her work experience within law enforcement, revealing a nuanced understanding of the “cop mentality.” Her familiarity with the law enforcement culture has facilitated a smoother adaptation process. Instead of finding it challenging, she focused on adapting to best support her officer’s specific needs, stating, “I feel like I’ve adapted pretty well to whatever we need, whatever that change is.”

Theme 6: Fostering Family Well-Being through Coping Strategies

Coping strategies prove crucial, particularly in the face of the unpredictability and stress associated with the law enforcement career. In the subtheme theme, *coping strategies*, participants shared the coping strategies they have found helpful in navigating the challenges and fostering resilience. Through these narratives, participants shared how coping strategies have empowered them individually and how these strategies fortify their families in confronting daily difficulties. Acknowledging the unique challenges of a law enforcement career, including its impact on well-being, stress level, and relationships, the subtheme *counseling as a coping resource* delves into its profound contribution to emotional well-being. The participants’ narratives demonstrate vulnerability, highlighting the power of counseling in nurturing emotional health, improving communication, and strengthening familial bonds in the face of adversity.

Coping Strategies

Participants in this study have shared invaluable insights into coping strategies that empower them to navigate challenges and foster resilience. Participant 3 emphasized the significance of maintaining a daily routine, noting its substantial impact on her well-being. She stated, “I have a morning routine that helps me significantly.” Despite encountering challenges in maintaining it, she strives to adhere to it diligently. Additionally, she finds solace in reading, such as books like *I Love a Cop*, which has helped her wrap her “head around this life.” She described a peaceful routine that allows her to “ease into the day,” helping her “regroup and get a mindset for the day.” In addition to reading, Participant 3 engaged in volunteer work, a productive outlet contributing to her overall well-being. Participant 6 echoed the sentiment of maintaining busyness and relying on faith to cope with her partner’s law enforcement career demands. She stated that “just staying busy” and “holding on to my faith” are her coping strategies. Similarly, Participant 5 emphasized the role of religion in providing comfort and strength, stating, “religion and just knowing that I have this higher power that I can lean on if needed.” Additionally, Participant 7 highlighted the significance of decompression by engaging in “road trips,” emphasizing the value of planning such trips when sensing the need for a break. She noted “you can recognize it more in other people than they can themselves.”

Participants also expressed the importance of maintaining control over their actions to external stressors. Participant 6 emphasized the importance of not internalizing negativity and setting healthy boundaries by stating, “a part of being resilient is not taking this personally, and respecting people’s opinions and setting healthy boundaries for myself and my family.” This sentiment was echoed by Participant 1, who asserted, “tune people out, the naysayers,” underlining the necessity of preserving mental well-being amidst external pressures. Participant 4

stated, “compartmentalizing thoughts and feelings and learning when and how I could use those to cope,” acknowledging the continuous learning process. She emphasized the importance of adapting to challenging situations and avoiding stagnation by stating, “you can’t let it stick on you. You can’t live life if you can’t get past that.” As Participant 3 reflected on the process of desensitization as a coping mechanism in response to hearing traumatic situations, she stated, “a coping strategy that has been ingrained in me when I hear terrible stories is to stay cerebral about it.” This ability to compartmentalize allows one to process tragic stories without becoming overwhelmed. Participant 2 further elaborated on desensitization, noting its potential benefits by stating, “no response to a traumatic situation is still just as healthy as having a response.” Finally, Participant 4 emphasized resilience as the ability to navigate through challenges without surrendering to stagnation. She stated, “a lot of how we cope with things is our resound that we are not going to be stuck in those places.” Moving forward despite adversity is essential to maintaining a sense of purpose in life.

Counseling as a Coping Resource

Counseling is a vital coping resource for many participants in navigating the challenges inherent in the law enforcement career. Participant 4 reflected on the transformative power of counseling, stating, “now we went to counseling, and we were okay when we left.” Adding to this narrative, Participant 7 openly shared, “my husband and I do couple’s therapy.” These statements underscore the impact of seeking professional support and highlight the positive outcomes that can emerge from therapeutic interventions. Participant 3 reflected on the profound effect of couples counseling, stating, “and I think that without couples counseling, I don’t know if we would have been able to do that.” She mentioned this as she shared how communication started to change in a way of building “empathy for each other.” Participant 4 echoed this

sentiment as she emphasized the choice between working through challenges or abandoning the relationship by stating, “we worked through it, we went to counseling, and you know, we can throw everything away, or we can work on it and be better on the other side of it.” This reflection encapsulates the pivotal role that counseling plays in their relationship and highlights its value in fostering growth and resilience. Despite the significance of couples counseling as a crucial piece in her relationship, Participant 3 acknowledged that not all spouses may be receptive to such intervention. She stated, “but I think that couples counseling was a pivotal piece of us, but I know that not all spouses want to participate in counseling of any kind.” This nuanced perspective highlights the diverse attitudes towards counseling with counseling within law enforcement families and the importance of individuality seeking support.

Through this narrative, it becomes evident that while couple therapy may not resonate with all spouses, individual counseling therapy serves as a foundation of support. Participant 6 shared insight into this journey of personal growth, revealing, “I sought therapy because I realized that I was not healthy for myself.” She recognized the need to prioritize mental well-being as a cornerstone for resilience within the family dynamic. Participant 2 echoed this sentiment, attributing immense credit to therapy and her psychiatrist for their pivotal role in her well-being. She stated, “therapy and my psychiatrist get all the credit,” emphasizing the impact of professional support in her journey towards resilience. Participant 1 shared a similar narrative of resilience obtained through therapy, recounting she has been “in and out of counseling for years.” Seeking therapy amid life’s trials and tribulations speaks to the enduring commitment to self-care and growth.

Furthermore, Participant 5 offered insight into the transformative power of individual counseling therapy in processing emotions and fostering self-awareness by stating, “I’m also in

therapy myself, so that kind of helps me process and dig through my emotions.” Lastly, Participant 7 emphasized the importance of therapy as a supportive space, stating, “so, I feel like my therapist is that space.” For her, therapy serves as a significant form of support, providing her with a designated time to share her thoughts and feelings. This narrative highlights the therapeutic value of having a safe and confidential environment to express oneself and work through challenges.

Chapter Four Summary

In conclusion, Chapter Four thoroughly explores the themes derived from the data collected in this study. The identified themes offer valuable perspectives on the challenges of LEO spouses’ lived experiences and the perceived roles and responsibilities they take to maintain family well-being and resilience. This research study’s findings highlight the importance of addressing the unique challenges LEO spouses face and the multifaceted needs of law enforcement families.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to identify the lived experiences, roles and responsibilities, and coping strategies utilized by LEO spouses to navigate STS and promote family well-being and resilience. Chapter Five represents the conclusion of this study. It begins by synthesizing the key findings from the data analysis conducted in Chapter Four and provides a discussion related to the literature on law enforcement career occupational stress, its effect on family dynamics, and how it affects LEO spouses. This synthesis combines the data's various themes, patterns, and insights into a coherent narrative, enabling an understanding of the experiences, challenges, and strategies LEO spouses utilize as they navigate the challenges associated with the law enforcement career. Following the synthesis, an in-depth analysis of the research findings is conducted, examining their alignment with the theoretical framework, and relevant literature. This discussion explains how the findings connect to existing research. Subsequently, the broader implications of this research study, both methodologically and practically, are thoroughly explored. The strengths and limitations of the research method are examined, reflecting on the profound influence of the findings and offering insightful suggestions for future research design and methodology. The practical implications underscore the real-world impact of this research study. The study's delimitations and limitations offer insights into challenges encountered during the research process and potential areas of improvement. By transparently discussing these issues, this section aims to shed light on the factors influencing the interpretation and application of the study's findings and identify opportunities for future improvement. Lastly, suggestions for future research are provided, highlighted by the gaps identified in the present study and emerging areas of interest emphasized

by the findings. These recommendations guide future research, mental health practitioners, and law enforcement organizations in further exploring and addressing the intricate dynamics of law enforcement well-being and resilience.

Summary of Findings

Upon reviewing the data, several overarching themes emerged for this study. These themes shed light on the daily experiences, challenges, and coping strategies LEO spouses utilize to maintain family well-being and resilience. Participants of this research study provided valuable insights into the diverse nature of their roles and responsibilities and the impact of the stressors accompanying their spouse's law enforcement career. From managing the effects of shift work to fostering effective communication and seeking mental health support, participants shared a narrative of their experiences and strategies to overcome obstacles. The findings highlight the resilience exhibited by LEO spouses as they navigate the various coping strategies to uphold family well-being. This synthesis provides a comprehensive exploration of the lived experiences and coping mechanisms utilized by LEO spouses to enhance family resilience.

The theme of the *psychological impact of the job on officers and their spouses* was a significant finding in this study, underscoring the profound psychological impact of law enforcement careers on officers and their spouses. In exploring the participants' experiences in this study, it became evident that those married to officers before joining the law enforcement career witnessed notable changes in their partners' personalities and moods attributed to the high-stress job. Participants described these changes as shorter tempers, increased frustration, and an emotional disconnect from their partners, leading to confusion and rejection within their marriages. The emotional disconnect revealed communication barriers stemming from officers' coping mechanisms, fostering emotional distance and loneliness among spouses. Delving deeper,

participants disclosed their resilience amidst vicarious exposure to traumatic incidents, working through anxieties and fears heightened by the present dangers of the law enforcement career.

The theme of *navigating challenging shift work* presents significant challenges for LEO spouses, impacting various aspects of their lives. Participants of this research study described experiencing a disconnect in their marriages due to the conflicting schedules. The irregular shift work makes it difficult for law enforcement couples to spend quality time together, leading to feelings of isolation and disconnection. Participants expressed frustration with the constant overtime demands, which often result in exhaustion and strained marital relationships. Some participants compared their relationship with their officer spouses to that of roommates, with minimal opportunity for meaningful interaction. LEO spouses also shared that their psychological and physical well-being was impacted as they independently navigated the challenges of shift work. Despite a desire for social connections, participants found it challenging to commit to social activities due to unpredictable schedules. Disruptions to daily routines, including missed holidays or celebrating on different days, further compounded the stress experienced by LEO spouses.

The theme of *navigating lack of support* highlights the challenge LEO spouses encounter in seeking support and connection within and outside the law enforcement organization. This finding underscores the need for more comprehensive support systems for LEO spouses. Participants of this research study shared feelings misunderstood by family and friends who struggle to comprehend the unique stressors they experience, leading to a sense of isolation. Consequently, they often feel unable to receive support from those around them and find solace in other law enforcement families despite sometimes feeling unsupported due to the absence of formal support groups within their law enforcement organization. Although social media support

groups are available, participants mostly find them ineffective in providing meaningful support and connection. When exploring the level of support they receive from their law enforcement organization, the participants articulated a perceived need for more support from the organization. Participants described their officers as overworked and underappreciated, highlighting the law enforcement organizations' lack of genuine concerns for the well-being of the officers and their families. From grappling with societal misunderstandings to navigating the complexities of seeking comfort within law enforcement families, participants highlighted isolation and lack of community understanding.

Within the theme of *family resilience*, participants in this study demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of the unique challenges posed by life in law enforcement families. Through a multifaceted approach, they navigated these challenges with strength and determination. One key aspect of their resilience is their commitment to independence, as they carve out separate identities and engage in self-care practices to maintain their well-being while supporting their officer spouses. This independence allows them to balance their needs and families, contributing to their resilience. Effective communication emerges as a vital tool in their resilience toolkit. Participants emphasized the importance of clear and open communication, recognizing its role in addressing marital conflicts and maintaining strong relationships. They adapt their communication styles to accommodate the needs of their officer spouse, valuing both verbal and non-verbal forms of expression. Participants also demonstrated resilience through their ability to adapt to the realities of law enforcement life. They accept the inherent challenges and uncertainties, acknowledging that change is inevitable in their journey. Through acceptance and adaptation, they find opportunities for growth and development, both individually and as couples. Overall, participants' resilience shines through their proactive approach to overcoming

obstacles, highlighting their strength and resilience in navigating the complexities of law enforcement family life.

In the theme of *fostering family well-being through coping strategies*, participants in this study shared the utilization of various coping strategies to foster family well-being and resilience, focusing on maintaining positive daily routines and mindsets. By staying busy with extra chores and responsibilities, such as volunteering or engaging in activities like reading, participants found a way to cope with life stressors. Some also relied on faith and religion, while others sought solace in road trips and other positive experiences. Maintaining a positive mindset also involved not taking negative comments about law enforcement personally and setting healthy boundaries with individuals who expressed such sentiments. Participants described the importance of tuning out negativity and remaining cerebral, desensitized, and adept at compartmentalizing their thoughts when faced with critical incidents or adverse news reports. These coping mechanisms helped them move past adversity and maintain their well-being and that of their families. While participants in this study shared remarkable coping strategies to navigate the daily challenges of law enforcement life, they acknowledged the importance of seeking mental health support when needed. Participants emphasized the significance of individual and couples' mental health services, reflecting on the positive impact of couples counseling on their marriage, particularly in enhancing communication skills. Despite acknowledging that not all law LEO spouses and officers are receptive to mental health counseling, participants openly shared their personal experiences. Alongside couples counseling, participants also emphasized the value of attending individual counseling therapy sessions, highlighting the benefits of having a dedicated space for them to process emotions. These findings suggest that while participants are capable of managing daily challenges through

effective communication, adaptation, and other coping strategies, seeking mental health therapy for addressing individual emotions is pivotal for their personal growth.

Discussion

The theme of the *psychological impact of the job on officers and their spouse* underscores the profound effects of law enforcement careers on both officers and their spouses. The significant changes in personalities and mood dynamics observed in officers transitioning into the profession reveal the toll of high stress, anxiety, and hyperawareness behaviors. These changes often result in mood disturbances, irritability, and emotional disconnect, presenting challenges in communication and emotional intimacy within marital relationships. To highlight the rapid and significant impact on the officers' personalities, a participant shared that there was a complete change after a year of her officer joining the law enforcement career, leaving her confused as she stated, "he is not the same person I fell in love with." A participant in a relationship with her officer for almost fifteen years provided valuable insight into the emotional changes she observed in her partner. She added to this narrative by stating she quickly noticed the emotional changes in her officer, emphasizing that the job demands were "mentally and physically exhausting from day one of the academy." Participants recounted noticeable shifts in their spouse's demeanor, characterized by shorter tempers and heightened frustration within the family dynamic. The literature supports these observations, suggesting that joining a law enforcement career can sometimes lead to new personality traits in officers, potentially contributing to marital difficulties (Geiger, 2024; Karaffa et al., 2015; Tjin et al., 2022). These abrupt changes occurred quickly within a brief period, leaving participants grappling with confusion and perceived rejection. Early in their spouses' law enforcement careers, participants were often unaware of the physiological, mental, and emotional changes their officer spouses

went through, and this unknown knowledge usually created friction within the marriage. Participants highlighted how their officers coped with the demands of their jobs by shutting down and emotionally disconnecting. The persistent emotional shutdown and avoidance of discussing feelings hindered the development of open and trusting communication within their marriages. Consequently, this emotional disconnect fostered feelings of loneliness, isolation, and abandonment among the spouses.

When exploring the symptoms of STS and vicarious exposure in this study's participants, it was found that participants with first-hand experience working as first responders are desensitized to hearing about critical events. Participants expressed their deep empathy, describing how they could imagine the pain their officers endure during critical incidents. When sharing these experiences, participants observe the emotional toll visibly weighing heavy on their officers, making them feel powerless to alleviate their officer's suffering. Participants also recounted experiences of mentally revisiting critical incidents shared by their officers. Although they reported no significant symptoms of STS or vicarious exposure, they did share having replays in their mind about some situations that have stuck with them. These findings align with the literature on LEO spouses who may undergo secondary trauma as a result of hearing about the experiences encountered during calls and knowing that their loved one is regularly exposed to dangerous situations (Tuttle et al., 2018; Friese, 2020). Some participants described feelings of anxiety, mainly stemming from concerns about the dangers associated with the law enforcement career. One participant remarked, "in the blink of an eye, I could be myself," as another participant emphasized their anxiety, stating danger is there, highlighting the persistent worry that is part of their daily lives. The events of 2020 were described as extremely stressful, leaving LEO spouses and officers very anxious. Symptoms of STS often manifest as intrusive thoughts,

anxiety, mood swings, sleep disturbances, fear, and worry, reflecting on the persistent concerns about the safety of law enforcement officers and potential exposure to harm or even death (Casas & Benuto, 2022; Porter & Henriksen, 2015). These firsthand experiences underscore the profound anxieties and uncertainties law enforcement families face.

The theme of *navigating challenging shifts work* highlights the disruptive impact of irregular work schedules accompanied by law enforcement careers. The challenges in navigating the shift work and its impact on marriage, emotional and physical well-being, and the disruption of daily routines are profound for LEO spouses. Shift work and irregular schedules present significant challenges for marriages within law enforcement families. Participants expressed difficulty maintaining quality time with their officers due to conflicting work schedules. Consistent with prior research, law enforcement officers frequently face extended work hours and rotating shifts, posing obstacles to familial bonding and participation in social and educational activities (Karaffa et al., 2015). In addition to the different and conflicted work schedules, the overtime demands contribute to exhaustion and strain on marital relationships, with one participant describing the toll as feeling a disconnect. This sentiment was echoed by others, with some comparing their relationship to that of roommates, experiencing minimal one-on-one interaction. In a comprehensive investigation involving more than 400 spouses of Scottish police officers, Alexander and Walker (1996) observed that around half of the spouses surveyed noted a minor decline in the quality of their relationship due to the stressors associated with their partner's work, while 9% indicated a significant impact on their relationship. The ramifications of shift work extend beyond emotional disconnection as feelings of isolation and the burden of managing psychological and physical well-being alone. Despite a desire for social connection, participants found it challenging to commit to activities due to unpredictable

schedules. Researchers have discovered that spouses identified significant disruptions to their social lives, primarily attributable to irregular shifts and extended work hours (Alexander & Walker, 1996).

The theme of *challenges in seeking support* explains the multiple difficulties LEO spouses encounter in accessing support networks. In examining the challenges LEO spouses face in obtaining support, this study uncovered a struggle in seeking support, both within and outside the organization. Participants expressed frustration when perceiving a lack of understanding from those unfamiliar with the law enforcement culture, highlighting the stress of their role as LEO spouses, noting that others do not understand or grasp the stress and complexities associated with being an LEO spouse. Moreover, participants reported discouraging advice from fellow officers, such as the notion that family and marriage are dispensable. Consequently, many LEO spouses turn to social media platforms for connection; however, participants of this study shared that they find these interactions largely ineffective and sometimes detrimental. Regarding support from the organization, participants voiced concerns about the pressure placed on officers to overwork, often at the expense of their health and well-being. Participants described the organization's approach as neglectful and lacking care for the officers and their families. This perceived lack of support underscores a broader issue of insufficient resources and assistance for LEO spouses, leaving them feeling isolated and disconnected from their spouses and the wider community. Participants highlighted the importance of addressing these support gaps to mitigate challenges like domestic violence and suicidality prevalent within law enforcement organizations.

The theme of *perceived roles and responsibilities of LEO spouses* illuminates spouses' significant but often overlooked contributions to law enforcement families. This theme explored

the perceived roles and responsibilities that LEO spouses undertake. In the study, it emerged that LEO spouses assume additional responsibilities to uphold the well-being and resilience of their families. Participants articulated their tendency to prioritize their officer's needs over their own, often putting off their responsibilities. As the literature suggests, LEO spouses are often aware of their officer's exposure to trauma and take on a supportive role, occasionally neglecting their well-being (Casas & Benuto, 2022). They expressed profound empathy for their officers, recognizing the physical and mental toll of the job that leaves them with little energy for household tasks upon returning home. Consistent with prior research, persistent exposure to stressful circumstances can adversely affect physical and emotional well-being (Karaffa et al., 2015). Despite feeling exhausted and having limited personal time, participants assume the responsibility of managing household affairs to make their officer's life easier, at the cost of their well-being. Central to their role is that of a supportive listener. LEO spouses actively provide support, particularly in response to the trauma encountered by their officers, by displaying patience and attentive listening after traumatic incidents (Landers et al., 2019). This research study found that LEO spouses offer their time and ear without being overbearing, allowing their officer to share at their own pace. Participants expressed a deep pride in their officer's achievements and profession, viewing being an LEO spouse as an honorable calling they must safeguard. Literature reflects a prevailing sense of pride, as law enforcement families strongly align themselves with the officers and the law enforcement organization (Casas & Benuto, 2022; Cox et al., 2022). They consider it their responsibility to provide unwavering support to their officers and their families, navigating any obstacles that may arise to maintain family well-being and resilience. Describing themselves as their officers' cheerleaders, they also bear the weight of societal expectations, often portraying and promoting their officers' accomplishments to uphold

a positive image of law enforcement. The findings contribute to the understanding of the heightened public scrutiny and perception of law enforcement, which adds another layer of stress for officers and their families (Karaffa et al., 2015)

The theme of *family resilience* highlights the remarkable capacity of LEO spouses to navigate and overcome the various challenges posed by their partners' law enforcement careers. Participants openly expressed the importance of maintaining individual pursuits and interests separate from their spouse's career. They emphasized the significance of doing their own thing. They recognized it as a form of self-care, allowing them to recharge and maintain personal well-being amid the stressors of their partner's profession. This autonomy was seen as essential for fostering a healthy balance in the relationship, allowing them to prioritize their well-being before coming together as a couple. Walsh (2003) emphasizes the importance of family members acknowledging and honoring each other's unique qualities, independence, and personal boundaries. Participants stressed the value of being your own person, emphasizing the need to assert their identities independent of their role as LEO spouses. While they took pride in sharing their partner's professional achievements, they also sought recognition for their accomplishments within the community. Law enforcement families navigate challenges and foster resilience through effective communication strategies. Participants highlighted the importance of honing communication skills, recognizing them as vital in overcoming obstacles. Reflecting on past struggles arising from a lack of communication and emotional withdrawal from their officers, participants emphasized the pivotal role of communication in building resilience. They acknowledged that communication styles vary among individuals and asserted that no communication is as good as verbal communication as they stressed the value of verbal expression over silence. Participants in this study demonstrated resilience by adapting to their

spouses' profession's challenges. They accept their daily difficulties, acknowledging that these changes are inevitable. Participants recognized that being married to a law enforcement officer is a personal choice, not a forced obligation, and they accept the aspects of their lives that are beyond their control. This acceptance allows them to distance themselves from resentment and negative thoughts associated with the job stressors. Some participants, particularly those new to law enforcement, hold onto the advice that the initial hardships ease after a few years, hoping to adjust to this lifestyle. According to Walsh (2003), even in difficult times, hope is a belief directed toward the future, where one can imagine a brighter tomorrow. Through this acceptance and adaptation, participants perceive personal growth and view their journey as an opportunity for mutual growth as a couple. They maintain optimism about the positive changes that can occur in their lives and emphasize the importance of moving forward and embracing change. Adaptation emerges as a central theme in this study, highlighting participants' ability to navigate and grow through their challenges.

The theme of *coping strategies* illuminates the diversity of adaptive techniques LEO spouses employ to navigate the inherent stressors of their partners' law enforcement careers. While participants in this study shared remarkable coping strategies to navigate the daily challenges of law enforcement life, they acknowledged the importance of seeking mental health support when needed. Participants emphasized the significance of individual and couples mental health services, reflecting on the positive impact of couples counseling on their marriage, particularly in enhancing communication skills. Literature has consistently identified familial challenges among law enforcement families as prominent issues often addressed by mental health professionals. (Karaffa et al., 2015; Miller, 2007). Despite acknowledging that not all LEO spouses and officers are receptive to mental health counseling, participants openly shared

their personal experiences. In the law enforcement culture, seeking help is often stigmatized due to fear of appearing weak, leading to isolation and reluctance to engage in therapy (Alrutz et al., 2020; Karaffa & Koch, 2015). Alongside couples counseling, participants also emphasized the value of attending individual counseling therapy sessions, highlighting the benefits of having a dedicated space for them to process emotions. These findings suggest that while participants are capable of managing daily challenges through effective communication, adaptation, and other coping strategies, seeking mental health therapy for addressing individual emotions is pivotal for their personal growth.

Implications

The findings of this research study highlight the critical need for targeted interventions to enhance support systems for LEO spouses. Law enforcement agencies should prioritize developing comprehensive support programs addressing LEO spouses' unique challenges. Support services should be available to spouses to assist them in navigating the emotional strain associated with their role and fostering healthy communication within their relationships. These services should include training programs and resources to help LEO spouses recognize and cope with psychological challenges and accessible mental health resources. Recognizing and addressing the psychological impact of law enforcement careers can enhance job satisfaction, marital relationships, and overall well-being for officers and their families. Law enforcement agencies should prioritize promoting work-life balance and fostering familial relationships among officers and their spouses. Flexible scheduling options and adequate leave can mitigate the negative impact of irregular shifts on marital relationships. Moreover, efforts to foster a culture of support within law enforcement organizations can help alleviate the burdens shouldered by spouses and promote a more resilient and cohesive law enforcement community.

Delimitations and Limitations

The recruitment process for this study posed significant challenges due to the specific population under investigation. Therefore, the recruitment expanded nationwide to overcome this hurdle, resulting in a small sample size that did not represent a specific geographical location. Additionally, participants who reported noticing significant changes in their officer's mood stability and personality were mainly LEO spouses in their relationship before their partner joined the law enforcement career. Some participants did not have prior personal or familial experience within the law enforcement culture. This lack of familiarity with law enforcement dynamics may have influenced their perceptions and response to their officer's experiences and emotional shifts. While this study offers valuable insights into the challenges of navigating irregular work schedules in law enforcement, the study overlooks the experiences of officers serving in specialized units with unique scheduling arrangements. Moreover, it is essential to acknowledge that not all participants in the study had children. Consequently, the additional internal responsibilities experienced by participants varied greatly. While some participants primarily focused on non-childcare duties and maintaining the household, others balanced childcare responsibilities alongside other duties. Due to the nature of the study's sample, the family dynamics and stressors related to childcare were not fully captured.

Recommendation for Future Research

Future research could explore how the timing of relationship initiation concerning entering a law enforcement career affects LEO spouses' perceptions of changes in the officer's personality, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of the relationship dynamics within LEO families. Future research could consider how individuals with varying degrees of exposure to law enforcement culture perceive and respond to changes in officer behavior and secondary

traumatic stress, thereby providing a better understanding of personal background and perceptions of psychological impact in LEO spouses. Future research could investigate the experiences of LEO spouses with younger children, as they face distinct challenges and stressors compared to those with adult children or no children. Moreover, exploring the potential impact of secondary traumatic stress on children within LEO families could further enhance our understanding of family resilience and well-being.

Chapter Five Summary

In conclusion, analyzing the themes in the qualitative data collected from interviews with law enforcement spouses provided insights into the family dynamics and their challenges. This study facilitated a deeper understanding of the challenges and unique family dynamics associated with law enforcement marriages through exploring the themes of *psychological impact of the job on officers and their spouses, challenges and impact of shift work, lack of support both within and outside the organization, perceived roles and responsibilities, and resilience and coping strategies to foster family well-being*. These findings underscore the need for tailored interventions and support systems to promote family well-being and resilience within law enforcement families. While this study has offered valuable insights, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations, including relatively small sample size, a lack of focus on a specific geographical area, variations in participants' experiences with law enforcement culture, and differences in perceptions among spouses based on their prior personal experiences. Future research efforts should explore spouses' years in the relationship before joining the career and that length of time's effects on spouses' perceptions, the degree of exposure to law enforcement culture and responses to secondary traumatic stress, experiences of spouses in navigating

challenges with younger children compared to those with adult children or no children, and the impact of secondary traumatic stress on children within law enforcement families.

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