National Fraternal Order of Police
2021 Critical Issues in Policing Survey

Comprehensive Report of 2021 Survey Findings

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About the Critical Issues in Policing Survey Series

Beginning in 2021, the National Fraternal Order of Police (NFOP) formed a partnership with Griffith University (Australia) to develop and conduct the Critical Issues in Policing Survey. The NFOP has instituted a practice of measuring the experiences and perceptions of members of law enforcement on a biennial basis, providing insights into practitioner experiences of the profession. Leveraging academic experts has allowed an evidence-informed approach to both survey development and analysis to be undertaken. Attention has been given to the methodological rigor of the survey instrument, using validated scales and clearly defined theoretical constructs. Further, survey development involved extensive input from leaders and scholars working in the law enforcement profession. This included committee members of the FOP Wellness Committee, who are all current or former law enforcement officers. Both the academic and practitioner expertise was sought during survey development ensured the robustness of the survey design. The 2021 survey was deployed to all NFOP members between September and November 2021. Additionally, the survey was promoted to various law enforcement agencies throughout the United States. The NFOP plans to continue surveying members of law enforcement. The 2023 Critical Issues in Policing Survey opened to respondents in August 2023.

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Critical Issues in Policing

Comprehensive Report - 2021 Survey of US Law Enforcement

KEY FINDINGS

Critical Issues

⇒ The most critical issues facing the law enforcement profession as perceived by law enforcement officers are 1) removal of qualified immunity for police officers, 2) violent crime, and 3) negative news media about law enforcement and other anti-police rhetoric.

Motivation, Community Relations and Police Practice

⇒ Eight out of 10 police strongly endorsed the perception that there is a current "war on cops."

⇒ Negative publicity was the most highly endorsed factor negatively impacting motivation to do the job.

⇒ Over 90% of officers 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that negative publicity increased the danger of policing.

⇒ Over half of active officers were concerned about being fired 'just for doing their job.' More than six out of 10 officers held serious concerns about being criminally prosecuted and civilly sued.

Police Stressors

⇒ Staff shortages, an organizational stressor, was rated as more stressful for officers than a colleague being killed or killing someone in the line of duty.

Mental Health

⇒ Among active officers, over half (53.6%) reported experiencing high levels of burnout; 44% of active and almost 31% of former officers reported some level of psychological distress.

⇒ Police officers responding to this survey reported higher rates of PTSD, depression, and anxiety compared to the general population.

⇒ In this group of police, 6.2% of officers (both active and former) had suicidal ideation during the previous 12 months and 18.5% had suicidal ideation at some point in their police career.

Wellness Services

⇒ Approximately 3 out of 4 officers reported that their agencies provided at least 7 different wellness programs.

Police Retention and Attitudes Towards the Profession

⇒ Over half of respondents frequently consider leaving their law enforcement career.

⇒ Despite the indication that large numbers of respondents had considered leaving their jobs, 85% reported that were proud to be in law enforcement; 40% strongly agreed with this sentiment.

Introduction

In August 2021, the National Fraternal Order of Police (NFOP), the largest organization of law enforcement officers in the world, undertook a national survey of members of United States law enforcement. This report details findings of the 2021 Critical Issues in Policing survey produced by the NFOP in collaboration with Griffith Criminology Institute, Griffith University, Australia[1].

The *2021 NFOP Critical Issues in Policing Survey* had several aims: to understand what officers believed are the most serious issues facing policing currently; to capture the prevalence of burnout, psychological distress, and suicidality among officers; to measure and compare various sources of stress experienced by law enforcement personnel; to measure the effect of current social and cultural events on officer well-being and policing practice; and to examine the availability, use of, and perceived effectiveness of wellness services. Measuring over 35 separate variables, the survey presents a comprehensive picture of the perceptions and experiences of US law enforcement officers.

National Survey

At the time of the 2021 Critical Issues in Policing survey, the NFOP had a national membership of approximately 350,000 active and retired police officers with subordinate lodges in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. Given the composition of the NFOP, the survey also included a group who are often underrepresented in police research: those who have retired from the police profession.
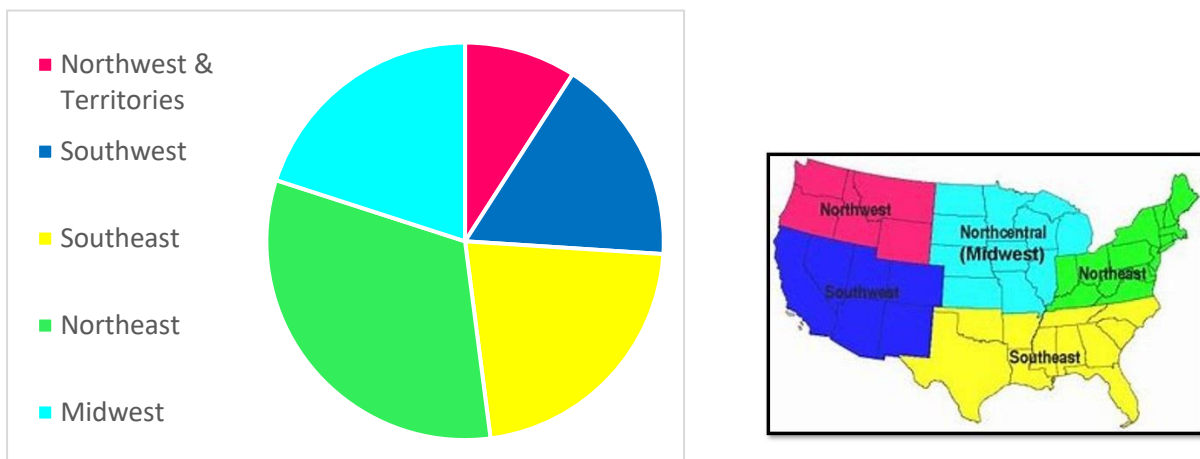

Figure 1. Respondents by Region (Active and Former Officers)

Nearly 6000 active (n=3994) and retired (n=1860) sworn officers participated in the anonymous survey, with responses recorded from all over the United States. This included all 50 states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, and the US territory of Guam. Responses were received from every region. In addition to NFOP members, survey responses were also received from various law enforcement agencies throughout the country and members of law enforcement who were not affiliated with the National FOP.

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[1] The 2021 NFOP survey findings will be included in a forthcoming publication (not yet available). Drew, J.M. & Martin, S. (forthcoming). Community relations, workplace stress and well-being in the context of mass demonstrations, defunding, and anti-police sentiment: A national study of the experiences of United States law enforcement. In Occupational Stress Injuries: Operational and Organizational Stressors Among Public Safety Personnel. Routledge.

Respondents

- Gender distribution of survey respondents was broadly reflective of the current gender composition of US police agencies; 84.2% males and 14.6% females.

- Most respondents identified as White (84.2%), with other respondents representing various ethnic groups (6.7% Hispanic/Latino, 4.2% African American/Black, 1.3% American Indian/Alaskan, 0.9% Asian/Asian American, 0.5% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 2.1% Other).

- Of current active officers, the largest group of respondents had 21+ years of service (38.5%), followed by 16 to 20 years (19.6%) and 11 to 15 years of service (17.0%) (see Figure 2 below).

- Most respondents were serving as officers or deputies (36.8%), with the next largest category being first line supervisors, corporals or sergeants (24.5%).

- Most respondents identified as general patrol or were undertaking operational duties (46.7%), followed by detectives or plain clothes officers (19.5%). This survey largely captures the experiences of rank-and-file officers; those who are most likely to be engaged in working daily with members of the public and performing frontline police functions.

- Respondents included officers from law enforcement agencies with different personnel strength; data was collected from agencies with fewer than 25 officers through to those with over 5000 officers. The largest group of respondents were members of mid-sized agencies employing 101 to 250 personnel.
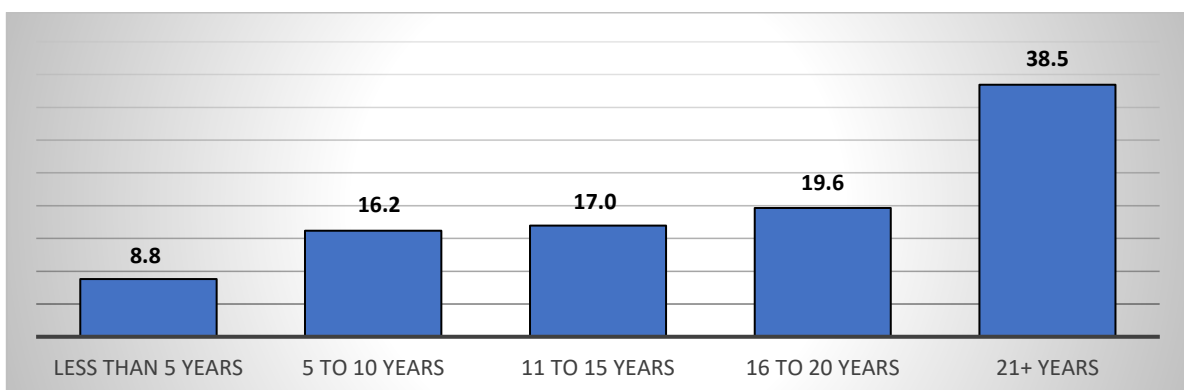

Figure 2. Years of Service (Active Officers)

The Critical Issues

The key aim of this survey of law enforcement was to provide a voice for frontline, law enforcement personnel who are most directly involved in delivering policing services to the public. It is vital to understand from their perspective what they view as critical issues facing the profession.

We have collected data from those who are on the front lines of policing. Given the current recruitment and retention crisis being experienced by police agencies across the US, understanding perceptions and concerns of officers in the enactment of their role as police provides insights into the decisions of officers to remain or leave the police profession.

The 2021 Critical Issues in Policing survey asked officers to rate the seriousness of several issues that were identified as being likely to concern officers. Critical issues were rated on 10-point scale, with 10 indicating that it was a more serious issue. The list of critical issues was generated through consultation with focus groups of active US law enforcement officers. Three groups of factors were examined: crime problems, community relations, and concerns related to the policing profession.

Crime Problems

Crime-related problems rated by officers as most serious were:

1. Violent crime
2. Illegal narcotics
3. Policing emotionally disturbed/mentally ill citizens
4. Illegal firearms
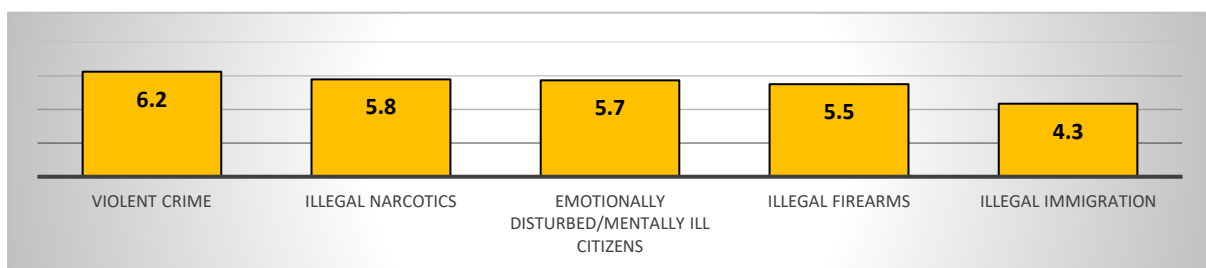5. Illegal immigration

Figure 3. Critical Issues: Crime Problems

Community Relations

Community relations issues rated by officers as most serious were:

1. Negative news media about law enforcement and other anti-police rhetoric
2. Calls to defund the police
3. Racial tensions between police and their communities
4. Unethical conduct/corruption by officers
5. Inappropriate or excessive use of force by officers

The top two community relations issues are reflective of the tensions that were omnipresent during the time of the survey. Law enforcement was operating in the aftermath of relatively recent protests against law enforcement across the nation that followed the death of George Floyd, which had occurred the previous year in 2020. The impact of these issues is explored further in this report.
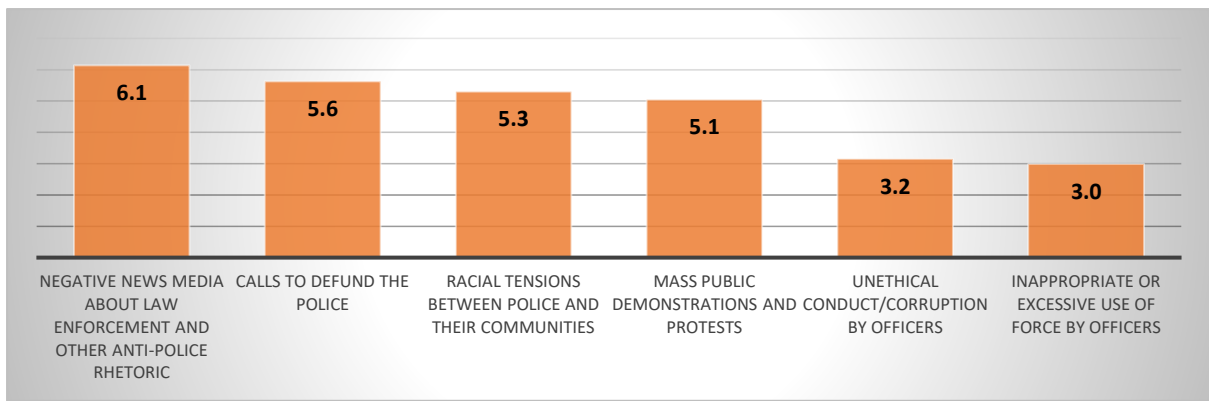
Figure 4. Critical Issues: Community Relations

Policing Profession

Within the category of the police profession, the issues rated as most serious by officers were:

1. Removal of qualified immunity for officers
2. Insufficient staffing
3. Levels of officer morale
4. Officer mental health
5. Rates of police suicide
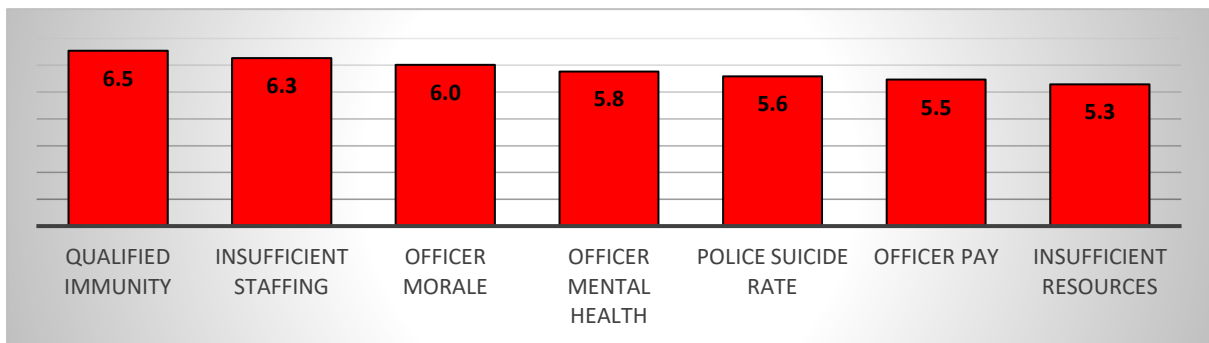6. Officer rates of pay
7. Insufficient resources

Figure 5. Critical Issues: Police Profession

The removal of qualified immunity would make officers more vulnerable to being criminally prosecuted and/or civilly sued. For many officers, this may make the job simply untenable due to such risks. This survey provides evidence to suggest that officers were highly concerned with this type of outcome. ***Over half the sample of active officers were concerned about being fired 'just for doing their job.' More than six in 10 officers held serious concerns about being criminally prosecuted and civilly sued.***
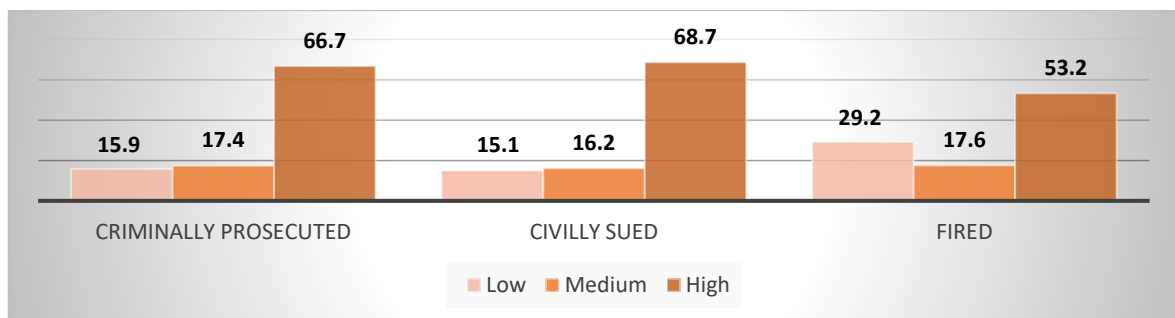

Figure 6. Qualified Immunity (Active Officers)

The Impact of Current Context on Motivation, Community Relations and Police Practice

The 2021 Critical Issues in Policing survey provided insight into how the contemporary environment in which police operate influences their motivation, community relationships, and police practices.

Motivation to 'do the job'

Issues related to of anti-police rhetoric, mass demonstrations, and the impact of negative publicity on motivation to 'do the job' of policing were examined. Over 77% of officers indicated that they 'somewhat,' 'quite a bit,' or 'very much agreed' that **negative publicity impacted their motivation to do the job**. Using similar metrics, over 70% of officers indicated that mass demonstrations and anti-police rhetoric impacted their motivation.
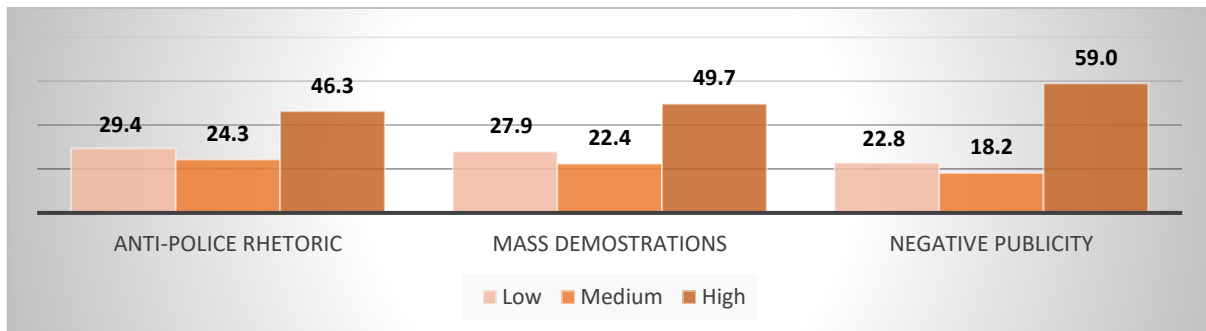

Figure 7. Motivation to 'do the job' (Active Officers)

Dangers in Policing

Over *90% of officers 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that negative publicity increased the danger of policing.* Officer perceptions of the increased danger of policing are evident and pervasive.

- 84% of respondents believed that citizens have become less compliant with police
- 90% believed that citizens have become more willing to resist police officers
- 85% believed that citizens have become more likely to assault officers

'War on cops' is a term used to capture an environment where the media and community are focused on scrutiny of police behaviors (MacDonald, 2016; Nix, Wolfe & Campbell, 2018). Around *eight in 10 police strongly endorsed the perception that there is a current "war on cops."* These views are reinforced by the increasing numbers of reports in the US of violent and felonious attacks on police, inclusive of the rise in ambush-style killings, which have been reported since 2020 (COPS Office, 2022).
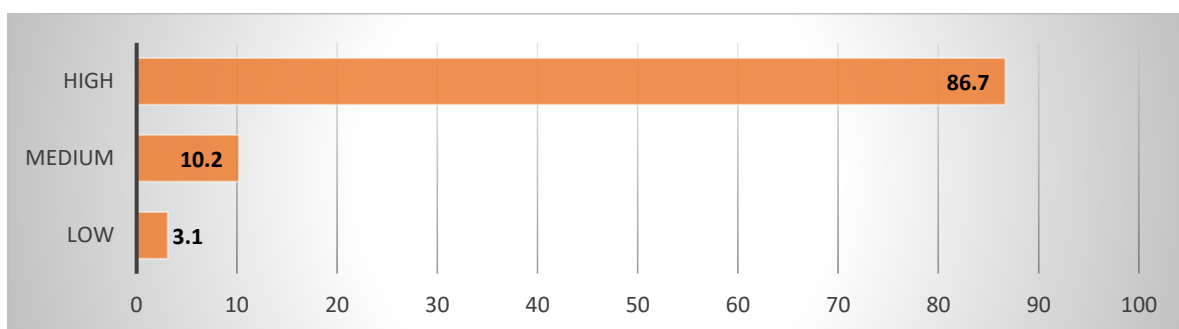

Figure 8. War on Cops (Active Officers)

Community Relations and Legitimacy

Audience legitimacy refers to "how the police believe they are viewed by the public" (Nix, Pickett & Wolfe, 2020, p. 218; Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012). Almost **four in five officers 'moderately' or 'highly' endorsed a perception that police are viewed by the community as lacking legitimacy**. The influence of perceptions of a war on cops and low audience legitimacy has implications for the willingness of officers to engage in more proactive policing activities (i.e., de-policing).

Impact on police practice

Over half of the officers surveyed strongly endorsed statements that are reflective of de-policing. Two-thirds of respondents indicated that public discussions and debates about law enforcement had caused them to be less proactive on the job. Relatedly, slightly more than two-thirds indicated apprehension about using force in the line of their duties, even when necessary. This is concerning not only for officer safety, but for public safety as well. When there is a perception held by police of a war on cops coupled with excessive negative media scrutiny, there is a threat of increasing crime rates as officers become insecure about their safety and community support for their work.
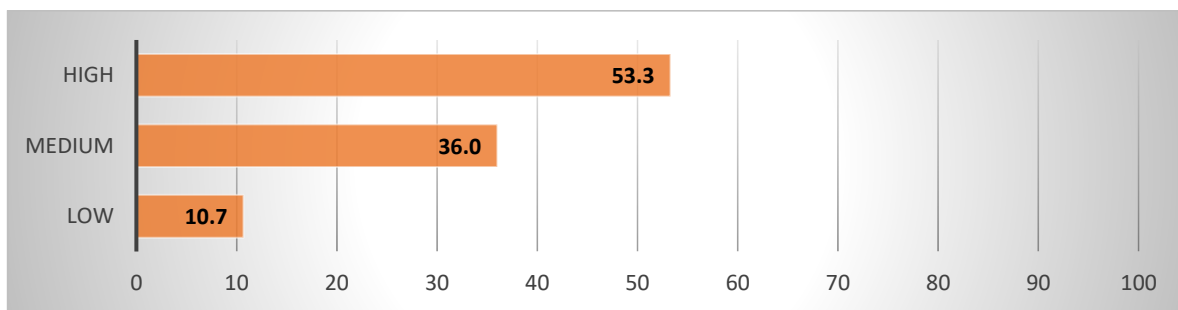

Figure 9. De-policing (Active Officers)

Multi-Faceted Nature of Police Stressors

A major aim of the 2021 survey was to capture the various types of stressors experienced by police across the US. Through greater understanding of the sources of officer stress, we can begin to better identify which specific stressors are connected to wellbeing outcomes for officers. Police stress was categorized into three groups: trauma or critical incident stress, other operational stress, and organizational stress.

Trauma and Critical Incident Stress

Of those officers who had experienced the critical incident or traumatic event listed, the top three most stressful events were:

1. Colleague being killed
2. Killing someone in the line of duty
3. Responding to a call where a child was badly beaten, sexually assaulted, or severely neglected

Officers were highly concerned with the physical dangers posed by policing, whether to themselves, their colleagues, or others in the community. Only one type of traumatic event in the top five related to the content of police work, (i.e., responding to a call where a child was badly beaten, sexually assaulted, or severely neglected). This research indicates that the danger of policing is generally perceived as more stressful in comparison to the traumatic content of police work.
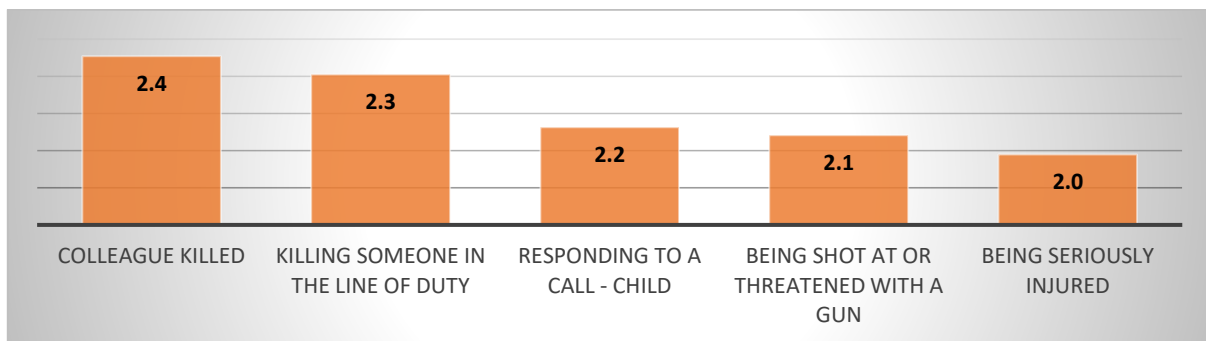
Figure 10. Trauma/Critical Incident Stressors – Top Five (Active Officers)

Operational Stress

Operational stress refers to stressors that are experienced by police that are related to the context of their job, including fatigue, work-related activities on days off, managing work-life balance, and physical health impacts (McCreary et al., 2017). The top five[2] operational stress factors reported by officers are:

1. Fatigue
2. Negative comments from the public
3. Not having enough time available to spend with friends and family
4. Finding time to stay in good physical condition
5. Feeling like you are always on the job

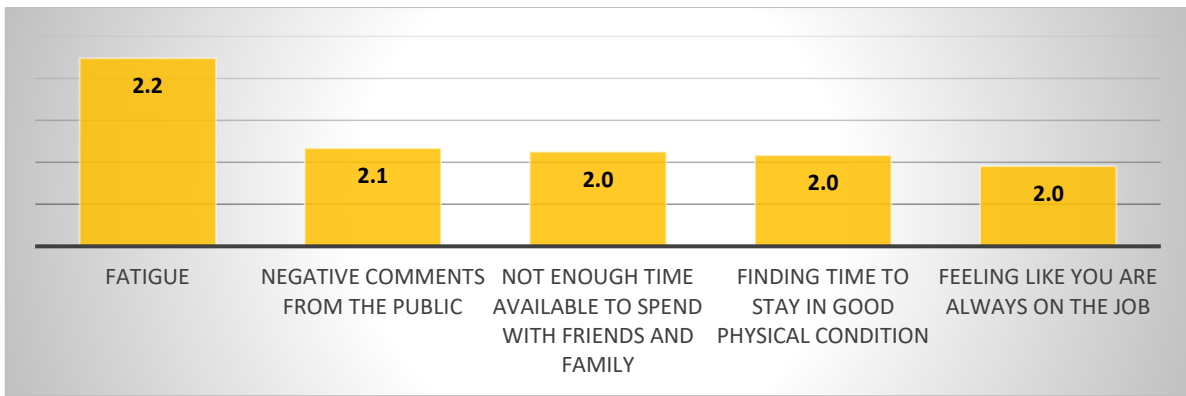[2] Operational stressors were listed in order, using the second decimal place; not included in Figure 11.

Figure 11. Operational Stressors – Top Five (Active Officers)

Organizational Stress

Organizational stress refers to those stressors experienced by police that are associated with the organizational culture of policing and/or the police agency. The current research indicates the top five[3] organizational stress factors reported by officers are:

1. Staff shortages
2. Bureaucratic red tape
3. Feeling that different rules apply to different people (favoritism)
4. Inconsistent leadership style
5. Constant changes in policy and legislation
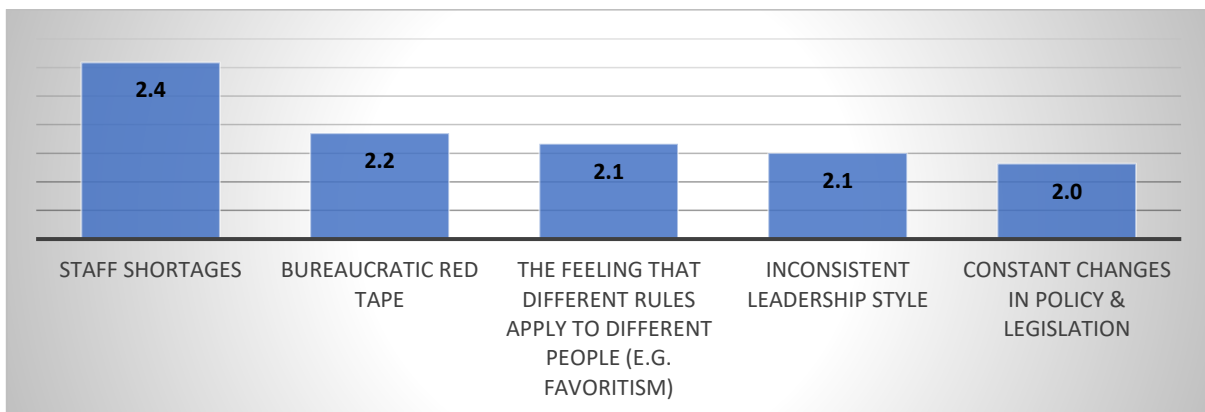
Figure 12. Organizational Stressors – Top Five (Active Officers)

Comparing Stressors

Examining police stress by focusing on the three categories previously described, of interest is the proportionality of harms caused by each type. Data gathered in this survey highlighted that organizational and operational stress play a prominent role. Examining all of the stressors together, revealed among the top five most highly rated stressors were two organizational stress factors, one operational stress factor, and two trauma/critical incident factors. It is extraordinary that **staff shortages, an organizational stressor, are rated as more stressful than a colleague being killed or killing someone in the line of duty.**

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[3] Organizational stressors were listed in order, using the second decimal place; not included in Figure 12.

Law Enforcement Mental Health

A key aim of the survey was to collect data on the levels of burnout, psychological distress, mental health diagnoses, and suicidal behaviors reported by US law enforcement, both active and retired members. With the inclusion of retired officers, the findings of the survey provide critical information about the need for ongoing mental health support following the end of an officer's career.

Burnout (Exhaustion)

Among active officers, over half (53.6%) reported high levels of burnout. Around eight in every 10 officers reported experiencing medium to high levels of burnout. The rates of burnout in policing are concerning and demand immediate action.
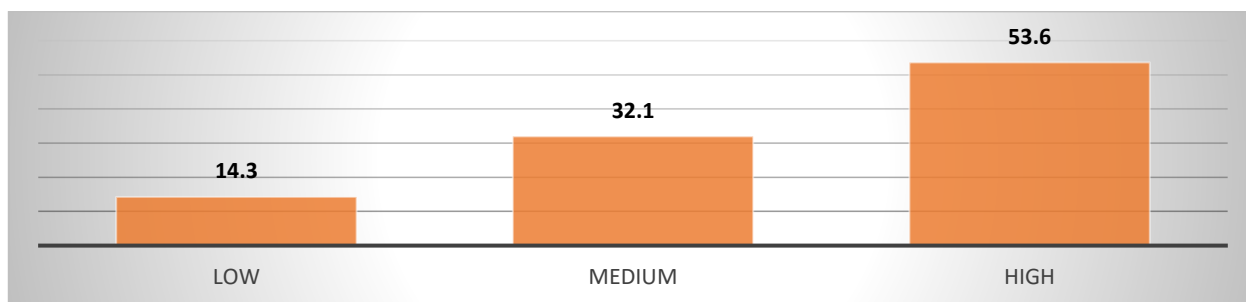

Figure 13. Burnout Categories for Police (Active Officers)

Psychological Distress

Of the officers surveyed, 44% of active and almost 31% of former officers are experiencing some level of psychological distress. For comparison, in a US national study of employed adults (National Health Interview Study data), 22.6% reported psychological distress (Daly, 2022). Of further concern, 11.2% of active officers and 6.6% of retired officers reported symptoms that constitute severe distress.

Officers who have retired from the law enforcement profession are an understudied cohort. As such, the findings of this survey, indicating that psychological distress remains relatively high following retirement from the profession, is an important contribution to current knowledge about police mental health. Ongoing support for psychological health needs to be addressed. Most retirees will no longer have access to agency support after leaving the profession, consideration needs to be given to how to support the psychological health of officers who have left policing but continued to be impacted by the experiences of their policing career.
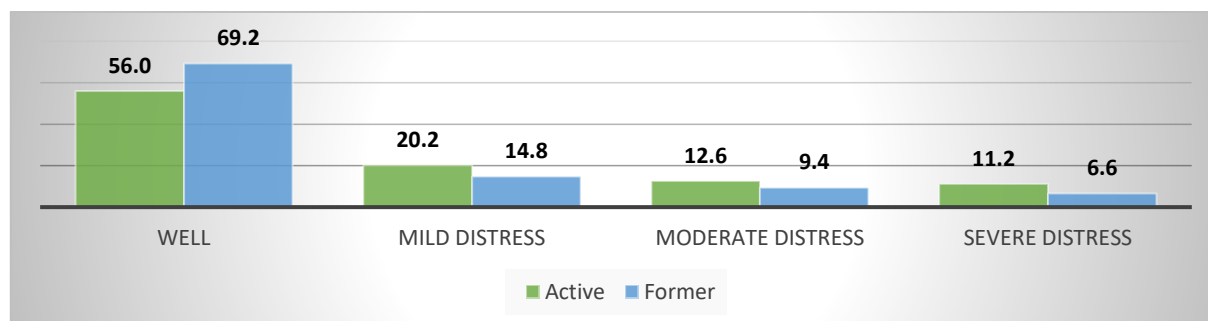

Figure 14. Psychological Distress Categories for Police (Active and Former Officers)

Mental Health Diagnoses

The three types of mental health conditions most often identified within police populations were explored. Active and retired officers were asked whether they had received a formal diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and/or anxiety during their employment as a police officer.

Similar numbers of officers across the active and retired cohorts reported PTSD, depression, and anxiety; with anxiety being the most reported condition, followed by depression and PTSD. These findings indicate that police officers are reporting higher rates of these types of mental health disorders compared to the general population (National Center for Health Statistics, 2021; National Center of PTSD, 2023; National Institute of Mental Health, 2023).

Mental Health Diagnoses

PTSD: Active 12.4, Former 13.9
DEPRESSION: Active 14.1, Former 15.3
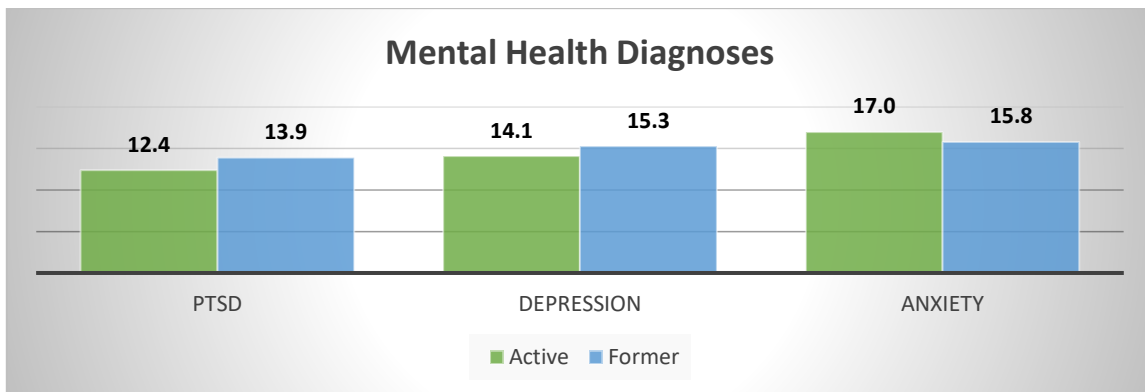ANXIETY: Active 17.0, Former 15.8

Active   Former

Figure 15. Mental Health Categories for Police (Active and Former Officers)

Suicidal Behaviors

Information was collected from officers regarding suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and suicide plans. Respondents were asked to consider the previous 12 months as well as the entire span of their police career. The data indicated 6.2% of officers (both active and former) had suicidal ideation during the previous 12 months and 18.5% had suicidal ideation at some point during their police career. Further, within the last 12 months, 2.2% of officers had made a suicide plan, and 6.8% had done so at some time during their career. In terms of suicide attempts, 0.3% of officers had made a suicide attempt within the previous 12 months, and 0.7% had made a suicide attempt during their police career.

Resilience

Resiliency refers to the capacity to withstand or to recover quickly from difficult events, circumstances and/or experiences. Programs designed to increase or support officer resiliency have become common in law enforcement. The survey revealed that almost 30% of active officers reported low resiliency. This compares to 52.6% and 17.7% of officers who reported medium to high resiliency, respectively.

Wellness Services for Law Enforcement

The NFOP is dedicated to making a positive impact on officer wellbeing. As such, an important aim of the survey was to measure the availability and quantity of wellness services available to members, their engagement with various wellness services, and the perceived level of effectiveness of these services[4].

Services Provided by Police Agencies

Twelve of the most common wellness services typically provided by law enforcement agencies to their personnel were measured in the survey. The top five most commonly available services were:

1. Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or similar specialized psychological services (91%)
2. Formal or informal debriefs with colleagues and managers (86%)
3. Chaplaincy services (85%)
4. Substance abuse programs (81%)
5. Peer support programs (77%)

Respondents whose agencies provided multiple wellness services reported lower levels of psychological distress compared to officers in agencies that offered fewer services. The greater number of services provided, the lower the level of psychological stress of the respondent. **Encouragingly, approximately 3 out of 4 officers reported that their agencies provided at least 7 different wellness programs to personnel.**

 The top five most accessed programs (when available) were:

1. Debriefs with managers or colleagues (48%)
2. Online training for mental and physical self-care (29%)
3. In-person training for mental and physical self-care (28%)
4. Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training (26%)
5. Annual mental health or annual wellness checks (25%)

Approximately half of respondents indicated that they had accessed at least one service over the preceding 12 months, and over a quarter reported that they had accessed four or more available wellness services.

Among those respondents who reported accessing services, the services that were perceived by users as being most effective were:

1. Peer support
2. Chaplaincy services
3. Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or similar specialized psychological services
4. Annual mental health or wellness checks
5. Substance abuse programs

Services External to Agencies

Respondents were surveyed about their engagement with wellness services that are external to those provided by their police agency. The survey findings indicated that 72% of respondents had accessed at least one external service over the preceding 12 months. A little less than 10% reported engagement with more than three external services.

The top five most accessed external services reported were:

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[4] Further detailed findings related to availability, access, and effectiveness of wellness services in law enforcement has been published separately. See Drew, J.M. & Martin, S. (2023). Mental health and wellness initiatives supporting United States law enforcement personnel: The current state-of-play. *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being, 8(Suppl_1),* S12-S22.

1. General Practitioner (62%)
2. The internet, for general wellness information (30%)
3. Psychologist/Psychiatrist (18%)
4. Other professional provider of mental health services (13%)
5. Telephone or virtual (online) counselling (9%)

Among respondents who reported accessing external services, the services perceived by users as being most effective were:

1. Other professional provider of mental health services
2. Psychologist/Psychiatrist
3. General Practitioner

Officer Relationships with The Profession and Police Agencies

When the 2021 survey was deployed, the policing profession had begun to recognize a sharp increase in rates of officers leaving their agencies and the profession. This was coupled with increasing difficulty in recruiting new candidates for the job. Since that time, the recruitment and retention crisis in the US has been further exacerbated. Staff retention for police agencies and more broadly, the police profession is one of the key focal points of the 2023 Critical Issues in Policing Survey.

Police Retention

Given that the NFOP recognized the emerging staffing crisis, respondents to the 2021 survey were asked to share thoughts about the current context in which law enforcement operates and its potential impact on intentions to leave the policing profession. ***Over half of respondents indicated that they frequently consider leaving the policing profession.***

Officers were asked about several issues that were likely to connected to thoughts of leaving the profession. Nearly half of respondents indicated that both calls for defunding of police and public demonstrations against law enforcement were tied to their thoughts of leaving. Over half of respondents indicated that negative publicity was an important factor. In our survey, the experiences of policing during the COVID-19 pandemic were less related to turnover intentions. Only 1 in 5 officers indicated that working through the COVID-19 pandemic was tied to thoughts of leaving the profession[5].

Pride in Profession, Job Satisfaction and Organizational Commitment

Despite relatively high rates of turnover intentions amongst law enforcement personnel and as discussed earlier, the increased negative sentiment of the community towards police, most officers are proud to be a member of law enforcement. Of the officers surveyed, 85% reported being proud to be in law enforcement, with 40% of the respondents strongly agreeing to this feeling of pride. Similarly, almost 70% of officers indicated moderate to very high levels of job satisfaction and moderate to high levels of commitment to their police agency.

Organizational Justice

The findings of the survey revealed that perceptions of organizational justice should be on the agenda of police leaders and their agencies. Organizational justice is broadly defined as organizational fairness, and often is operationalized to include elements of procedural justice (fairness of processes), distributive justice (fairness of outcomes) and interactional justice (interpersonal behavior of management) (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001). In particular, the low levels of organizational justice that are being reported by the police cohort should be of concern. Over half of the respondents, indicated some level of disagreement with the statement that they are fairly paid commensurate with their effort, education, and levels of training and experience. Most officers indicated that they felt that their opinions were not valued or considered by their agency, that police management was not open to differing viewpoints, and that good performance was not recognized and rewarded by their agency.

Agency Concern for Stress Prevention and Psychological Health

Most officers reported that senior management does not provide adequate support for stress prevention, and they perceive that senior management deems productivity more important than the psychological health of their officers. It was positive to find, when asking officers about their direct supervisor, that generally direct supervisors are reported to be supportive of stress prevention and value employee psychological health over productivity.

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[5] Research on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on law enforcement psychological health was conducted in a separate survey conducted by NFOP and Griffith University. See Drew, J.M. & Martin, S. (2021). Policing during a global health pandemic: Exploring stress and wellbeing of police and their families. *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being, 6(3),* 104-111.

Stigma

In recent years, conversations surrounding mental health have increased among members of law enforcement. As such, one aim of the survey was to identify how officer perceptions of stigma specific to help-seeking may have shifted[6].

Over half of respondents indicated, to varying degrees from 'a little' to a 'great deal', beliefs about help-seeking:

- That people in the agency would react negatively toward them or think of them in a less favorable way
- That people in the agency would think that they pose a risk to others
- That seeking support may negatively impact their chances for promotion
- That their firearm may be removed, and they may be put on a desk assignment

Police culture seems to have a significant impact on the willingness of officers to seek support when needed. Of the officers participating in this survey, 70% of officers indicated feeling pressure stemming from the police culture to "just suck it up." In addition, respondents expressed concern over confidentiality should they utilize agency-provided services. Nearly one quarter of officers indicated that this particular issue caused them a great deal of concern.

Differences in levels of perceived stigma were relative to time employed within the profession. Respondents with fewer than five years of service reported significantly lower levels of stigma compared to those with more time on the job.

Respondents who indicated symptomology of psychological distress reported greater perceptions of stigma compared to respondents who did not report distress.

It is encouraging that wellness programs do seem to be having an impact on help-seeking stigma. Respondents, whose agencies provide seven or more wellness programs or services to their personnel, reported less stigma compared to those in agencies where fewer services were provided. Where services are available, respondents who reported engagement with services had lower levels of perceived stigma compared to those respondents who have not engaged with available services.

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[6] A publication produced from the first survey conducted by the NFOP in collaboration with NBC News focused on help-seeking stigma. See Drew, J.M. & Martin, S. (2021). A national study of police mental health in the United States: Stigma, mental health, and help-seeking behaviors. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology, 36,* 295-306.

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Other Relevant Information

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Martin, S. (2023). National Fraternal Order of Police 66th Biennial Conference, Las Vegas, Nevada. Our Voices Have Been Heard: Findings of the 2021 FOP Critical Issues in Policing Survey.

Drew, J.M. & Martin, S. (2023). International Association of Chiefs of Police Officer Safety and Wellness Conference, Anaheim, California. Emerging Trends Impacting Officer Wellness and Engagement with Services: Maximizing Positive Impact.

Martin, S. & Drew, J.M. (April, 2023). The Justice Clearinghouse Podcast. What police officers want: Consulting the source.

Martin, S. & Drew, J.M. (2023). National Fraternal Order of Police Wellness Summit, Nashville, Tennessee. The current state of officer wellness: From the voices of our members.

Drew, J.M. & Martin, S. (2022). International Association of Chiefs of Police, Dallas, Texas. A National Study of U.S. Law Enforcement Officers: Critical Issues, Psychological Health, and Well-Being.

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Martin, S. & Drew, J.M. (2022). National Fraternal Order of Police Leadership Matters Training Conference, Nashville, Tennessee. Biennial Issues in Policing Survey: Preliminary Findings.

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