

A Couple's Perspective on Policing:  
Sources of Stress & Strategies for Stress Management

by

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### **Abstract**

Policing is widely recognized as a stressful occupation due to the long and unpredictable hours, potential for violence and danger involved in regular patrol duties, as well as the demanding nature of the organization. All of these factors can place extreme levels of stress on officers and test their ability to cope. The main goal of the present study was to explore the experiences of Canadian officers and their spouses concerning policing stress and how they manage that stress, both individually and as a couple through the lens of their relationship. Using a qualitative narrative approach, couples were interviewed together to share their perspectives on the most stressful aspects of policing, as well as the positive (healthy) and negative (unhealthy) coping strategies used individually and jointly by officers and their intimate partners to manage work-related stress. A wide variety of sources of policing stress were discussed by the couples. Both individual and family-oriented stress management strategies were identified. Recommendations for future research and for policy and practice based on the findings from the present study were also discussed.

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English teacher so she will appreciate that literary nod) and made my life a living hell (at times) but a beautiful well worth it feat of drive strength and pride. With all that this little heart can handle, I love you both so very much. It seems fitting to recite the first words you read to me as now I have written (a lot) of my own. "I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always, As long as I'm living, my baby you'll be."

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### **Dedication**

This is dedicated to the courageous men and women that serve our communities near and far and the spouses, family, and friends that support them. Of course, a special dedication to the couples that allowed me into their lives to help give a voice to their powerful stories in hopes that others can learn and benefit from them.

I would also like to dedicate this thesis to all of those that support myself and my husband both professionally and personally. This could not have been possible without the constant encouragement from my support network: my mother, my father, my husband, and our family and friends.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Policing is a family occupation. Families are significantly affected in a variety of ways when a loved one works in law enforcement. Family life plays a critical role in the officer's much needed support system. Despite this significance, little is known about how work-related stress impacts officers' family relationships. The gap in knowledge concerning this important issue poses many potential risks: officers and their family members may feel isolated and overwhelmed, their relationships may suffer, and the quality of policing service to the community may be compromised.

Law enforcement officers play an integral role in society. Their typical duties are made up of a wide range of services, including: general patrol, public relations, law enforcement, organized crime, gang/ street crime prevention, and traffic assistance. Due to the extensive list of services, officers are exposed to a number of health and safety concerns unique to their job (Parsons, 2004). Law enforcement officers are at risk for assault, homicide, and injuries due to the physical nature of their work. The dynamics of their work also exposes them to significant psychosocial hazards such as stress, sexual harassment, and discrimination (Kirschman, 2008).

Although these hazards are well known in policing services in the United States and elsewhere, they are not well understood within a Canadian context. In addition, most previous work has investigated the perspective of officers themselves, rather than from the shared perspective of officers and their spouses. Therefore, the main goal of the present study was to explore the experiences of Canadian officers and their spouses concerning policing stress and how they manage that stress through the lens of their relationship. Examining how both the

officer and his/her partner utilized and reacted to each other's individual and joint stress management strategies is important; however, few studies have investigated both of these perspectives, and even fewer have investigated them jointly. Both positive and healthy coping strategies that increase individual health and well-being or strengthen the partner relationship, as well as negative or unhealthy coping strategies that may compromise individual health and well-being or challenge the partner relationship were investigated.

In the following review, the types of stress and the potential effects of stressors that officers experience (Stinchcomb, 2004) are outlined. Theoretical frameworks for understanding stress and associated coping mechanisms will also be discussed. Special emphasis will be placed on those coping mechanisms that act as protective and preventative factors against potentially debilitating effects. In summary, the following literature review will address the nature of policing stress, formal definitions of stress, as well as a theoretical framework for stress and coping, including both positive and negative coping strategies.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

Policing is widely recognized as a high stress occupation that takes its toll (Kirschman, 2008). Being a police officer is a source of pride for both officers and their families. But the long unpredictable hours, stressful and violent nature of the job and the organizational structure can turn the home life of an officer into a rollercoaster ride (Kirschman, 2007). Research has shown that those employed in law enforcement and their family members experience high levels of stress (Kurtz, 2008), as demonstrated by physical symptoms such as increased blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, insomnia, and migraines, (Kirschman, 2007; Kurtz, 2008; Parsons, 2004; Roberts & Levenson, 2000; Stinchcomb, 2004.) Work-related stress can also contribute to anxiety, poor affect, and marital discord (Kurtz, 2008; Roberts & Levenson, 2001; Parsons, 2004; Stinchcomb, 2004). Stress reverberates through each and every aspect of their life; law enforcement officers are at higher risk for divorce, alcoholism, domestic violence, and suicide (Lott, 1995).

Policing shares many similarities with other law enforcement occupations. The focus of the present study was on municipal officers from a large urban city centre, although it is acknowledged that law enforcement professionals such as the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Provincial Police officers, and military and correctional services personnel may share similar job characteristics. In the following section, the main types of stress that municipal officers often deal with both on and off duty will be reviewed. Some researchers have categorized policing stress into five separate yet complementary categories, including occupational, organizational, personal/psychological, physical, and social (Kirschman, 2007). In the following section of this

review, three main categories of stressors are described, including: 1) exposure to violence and traumatic events; 2) work schedules, including rotating shifts, longer hours and heavy workloads; and 3) occupational stressors, such as bureaucratic structure, and the extreme physical, mental, emotional, and psychological demands of policing.

### **Exposure to Violence & Trauma**

Witnessing traumatic events such as deaths and serious injury to civilians, as well as fellow officers, school and/ or workplace shootings, child deaths, suicides, domestic and child abuse cases, and the handling of dead bodies (Black Becker et al., 2009) are all examples of daily service calls that create stress for officers. It has been estimated that during one ten to twelve hour shift an officer can experience anywhere between 30 to 50 single traumatic episodic events (Kirschman, 2007). The nature of these events is diverse; they can be violence-related, or include other incidents such as potential exposure to communicable disease, or contact with biohazards such as mould, chemical spills, or unsanitary conditions (Kirschman, 2007). These stressful events are acute and happen rapidly without the officer being able to recover or debrief between events or before taking the next call. Black Becker and colleagues (2009) reported that police officers are at risk for developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to the large portion of police work that is immersed in trauma (Black Becker et al., 2009). Robert Loo (2003) described police work in Canada as “one of the most stressful occupations in the modern world” (p. 313) because of the high degree of exposure to violence and life threatening situations. Because officers are often the first emergency responders to arrive at the scene, they witness daily scenarios that involve death, injury, and significant human suffering.



Post-traumatic stress theory suggests that unexpected episodic or long term exposure to extraordinary events, specifically those events that have the potential to cause/ threaten death or cause serious injury, can lead to the development of psychophysiological responses (Johnson, Todd, & Subramanian, 2005). Symptoms can range from short term discomfort to long term health effects including high blood pressure and hypertension (Johnson et al., 2005). In one study of 100 police officers, Robinson, Sigman, and Wilson (1997) found that there were strong correlations between police stress and the presence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These correlations were even stronger when the respondents had been exposed to life threatening situations while on duty, such as witnessing a homicide (Johnson et al., 1997).

Although police officers are diagnosed with PTSD almost as often as military personnel, many go untreated (Parsons, 2004). This may be due to fear of criticism or required leave if they outwardly seek help (Kirschman, 2007; Kurtz, 2008; Parsons, 2004; Wu, 2009). Dowling, Moynihan, and Genet (2006) found that 68% of police officers involved in the 9/11 terrorist attacks suffered from PTSD, and that these officers reported rates of domestic violence and divorce that were substantially higher than those of the general population (Dowling et al., 2006). Wright, Borril, Teers, and Cassidy (2006) found that 37% of prison officers met the criteria for PTSD, while Violanti (2006) found that 30% of police officers in their sample demonstrated moderate to severe PTSD. Unfortunately, none of these studies evaluated how the symptoms of PTSD were related to marital or partner relationships. Instead, their focus was on describing the symptoms of law enforcement officers, and how they responded to certain treatment options. The perspectives of their family members were not addressed.

## **Work Schedules**

The negative effects of rotating shift work on a person's general well-being are well known (Dereouti, Geurts, Bakker and Euwema, 2004). The first and most documented effect is the change from a regular "diurnal" (Dereouti et al., 2004) schedule to an irregular schedule. This means that workers on shift schedules do not follow a regular sleep at night, wake during the day timetable, which has dramatic negative implications on an individual's circadian rhythmic functioning (Dereouti et al., 2004). Human bodies are designed to sleep at night when it is dark and awake in the morning as the sun does; this is a feature common to the majority of mammals, including humans. Officers that work rotating shifts are not able to regulate their sleep/wake patterns which can affect them by causing a disruption or complete lack of sleep.

Sleep is not only necessary to relax and rejuvenate, but also to ensure mental and physical awareness while on the job. When officers working rotating shift begin their days off, they are back to 'normal' on a regular diurnal pattern. When officers are switching between various shifts or their days off, it often takes several days for their system to fully adjust. In some cases, if officers are coming off of a night shift, s/he may simply stay awake the whole day and attempt to sleep at night when his/her spouse does. The act of pulling an 'all-nighter' can create extreme levels of fatigue and exhaustion, which contribute to irritability, anxiety, and physical illness. Some studies have argued that those who adopt a shift or night work schedule are at a greater risk of developing health concerns (Costa & Di Milia, 2006). These concerns include poor sleep regulation, lack of sleep entirely, digestive, and cardiovascular troubles, as well as decreased ability to focus while at work. Shift work has also been directly linked to work family conflict and depression (Costa et al., 2006); those who work shift/night work suffer from time pressure as well as an increase in stress levels while working and resting (Costa et al., 2006).

In addition to physical stress, rotating shift work may also contribute to social and family-related stress. A rotating schedule may cause an officer to miss family or social events because they are either working overnight or sleeping (Kirschman, 2008). Since most school plays, birthday parties, anniversary celebrations or holiday dinners are during the weekend or evenings after work, they may feel left out of important family functions. “Wednesday is not Saturday” summed up one Sergeant with regard to missing family outings (Baer, Nachreiner & Volger, 1981; Demerouti et al., 2004). Not only does missing these family milestones affect the officers, but it also places stress on their partner who is often attending functions alone, and may also stress children who have one less parent cheering for them at the end of a school play. Missing events may have a cumulative effect on the quality of the intimate partner relationship. Some partners have reported less relationship satisfaction due to having opposite work weeks, which decreases the amount of quality time the couple can engage in (Kirschman, 2008).

The unpredictability of police work can negatively impact families in other ways. For example, Thompson, Kirk, and Brown (2005) examined the effects of work stress spillover to the family. This study was particularly interesting as it was the first study that looked at female officers specifically. Results indicated that spillover effects of work related stress such as emotional exhaustion negatively impacted the family environment, and added to a perceived lack of family cohesion (Thompson et al., 2005). This study was valuable in that the experience of female police officers, which had previously been somewhat ignored in the literature, was addressed. However, since the focus of this study was on work-based support to combat stress, input from partners or other family members was lacking.

Another source of stress for police officers includes long work days and heavy workload. It is not uncommon for an officer to work a longer than average work day (10 to 12 hour shift)

with a strong possibility of staying late and having to work overtime. The unpredictability of the shift itself makes it very difficult for officers and partners to know when the officer will return home. For example, an officer may work a night shift or 'graveyard' shift, getting home in the early morning but then needing to leave again almost immediately to testify in court. Due to staff shortages because of illness, injury, vacation, or even stress leave, police officers working general patrol often have to cover a larger service area in the same amount of time (Kurtz, 2008). This creates stress on the officers who are unable to adequately cover their larger service area while still maintaining a high standard of community involvement.

### **Occupational Stressors**

Policing involves a variety of occupational stressors, such as the bureaucratic nature of the police service, as well as the physical and social demands of the job. According to Kirschman (2007), a police trauma specialist, organizational stress is the most damaging type of stress facing officers (Kirschman, 2007; Kurtz, 2008; Wu, 2009). She noted that the paramilitary structure of most police organizations has far more negative consequences than does episodic trauma. Other research supports this notion. Storch and Panzarella (1996) found that officers indicated organizational factors such as poor management and supervision was more stressful than witnessing human tragedy. Some officers described feeling undervalued and unappreciated by their own organization instead of feeling protected and supported (Wu, 2009).

Policing is also a physically demanding occupation. Whether it is pounding the concrete while 'walking the beat', spending all day in a cruiser doing surveillance or general patrol activities, or working at a desk for a 12 hour shift, an officer's duties can be hard on the body. In addition to the ergonomic pain sustained from poor footwear and police vehicles, law

enforcement officers also must be physically fit in the event that they must sprint to chase suspects, jump fences, or engage in physical combat while wearing up to 50 pounds of protective gear. Sprains, tears, broken bones, and wounds are all common battle scars of police work (Kirschman, 2007). Often, officers will continue to work while they are still healing, due to already being short staffed and the need to work in order to support their families (Kirschman, 2007; Kurtz, 2008; Wu, 2009). There are a number of long term effects that physical strain has on officers, such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, arthritis, and hypertension, which all have been shown to be more common among police officers (Kirschman, 2007; Stinchcomb, 2004; Wu, 2009).

Officers have indicated that another demanding aspect of their occupation is the unpredictability of their shift. Policing is not a job with scheduled lunch or coffee breaks. It is not uncommon for officers to work a shift with only a short break during a ten to twelve hour shift. This lack of breaks may result in missed meals, and infrequent bathroom breaks. Kirschman (2007) noted that officers suffer from higher rates of kidney disease and urinary tract infection as a result of not having access to bathroom breaks when needed.

Perhaps the most commonly associated stress associated with policing is social stress, which pertains more to the relationship conflict officers often experience with their intimate partners. Research indicates that both partners complain about social stress as a major cause of conflict in their relationship (Kirschman, 2007; Kurtz, 2008; Stinchcomb, 2004; Wu, 2009). For example, a study by Stinchcomb (2004) reported that male officers faced negative effects of sexual harassment while on the job. Officers who were called to break up a bar fight or a house party were sexually assaulted both verbally and physically by females on scene (Stinchcomb, 2004). Officers felt conflicted as to how to seek help and also reported that they did not discuss

these feelings with their partners in order to not have them worry about infidelity issues (Stinchcomb, 2004). As noted earlier, officers often have to miss family events such as date nights and school functions due to the demanding nature of their work. Due to the nature of policing schedules it is very challenging for officers to maintain relationships with their civilian companions (Kirschman, 2007). Those who spend time with work-related friends because of similarities in schedules may inadvertently spend less time with intimate partners and other family members (Kirschman, 2007). Although some research has addressed the perspective of officers and their partners on these issues using interviews (e.g., Kirschman 2007, 2009) data from Canadian sources is lacking in the literature. To address this gap, the proposed research will examine the perspectives of Canadian officers and their partners.

In addition to time constraint issues, another common concern for partners of officers is the lack of communication and emotional support left for them at the end of a shift (Kirschman, 2007; Wu, 2009). Officers spend their day interacting and communicating with the public, including victims, perpetrators and media. When officers return home after their shift, many officers report they need to shut down and withdraw from communication with their partner (Kirschman, 2007; Wu, 2009). This lack of communication can contribute to stress and conflict between intimate partners (Kirschman, 2007; Wu, 2009).

Because of these many sources of stress it is commonly assumed that police officers are at a higher risk of divorce in comparison to the general population. However, there is little empirical research to support this belief. One study using census data in the United States by McCoy and Aamodt (2010) found that in fact, police officers have lower than average divorce rates. This study also found that other professions such as massage therapists, bartenders, and postal service workers have higher than average divorce rates in the United States (McCoy &

Aamodt, 2010). Unfortunately, similar studies on the divorce rates of officers in Canada have not yet been conducted.

Most of the research to date examining sources of stress for police officers has not been conducted in Canada. The few Canadian studies that do exist have not examined the experiences of both male and female officers, and have often not included the perspective of the civilian partners of officers. The lack of inclusion of female officers is a serious gap in the literature, since the number of female officers serving in both municipal and national police forces has increased considerably in Canada. According to Statistics Canada, the number of female police officers in Canada has slowly increased over the years. For example, in 2001, 14% of police officers in Canada were female, in contrast with 20% in 2011. In total, there were 285 more female officers across the country in 2011 than in the previous year (Retrieved May 28 2012 from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-225-x/2011000/part-partie1-eng.htm>).

In summary, officers must deal with several differing types of work-related stressors. The impact of these stressors upon individual well-being and the quality of the intimate partner relationship is dependent, to a great extent, upon the coping mechanisms officers use. The next section of this review provides a definition of stress, describes relevant theories of stress, and examines positive and negative coping mechanisms used by officers and their partners.

### **Definitions of Stress**

Hans Selye is widely recognized as the ‘father of stress’ because he was the first to define stress as “a generic response of the body to any demand placed upon it” (Selye, p. 18, 1956). He considered “demands” to be anything that elicited feelings of anxiety, and posited that demands are unique for each person. For example, crossing a busy street may evoke feelings of

helplessness and fear for one person, while for another it brings out no such response. Selye was the first person to conduct a variety of studies on animals and humans to examine chemical and hormonal changes due to stress. As part of this research, Selye identified a number of external demands, or stressors that affect the body. This effect was referred to as the stress response. Selye believed that the stress response can occur whether the demands experienced are either positive or negative. For example, a rollercoaster ride is stressful but it can be enjoyable; competing in a marathon is also stressful yet people look forward to training all year, and watching a horror movie can cause feelings of stress, one of the draws of such a film.

Selye considered adaptation to be a key consideration in terms of whether stress has positive or negative effects on well-being. He coined the term “eustress” to describe positive or healthy stress. During the period of eustress, the adaptation that is required is resolved quickly and the individual is able to quickly return to his/her normal state. The term “distress” was defined as negative or unhealthy stress which tends to be excessive or prolonged stress. Of note, Hans Selye referred to police work as "the most stressful occupation in America even surpassing the formidable stresses of air traffic control" (p. 89, 1979). Based on Selye's early work, several theories of family-related stress were developed; however, for the purpose of the present study, the Double ABC-X model developed by McCubbin (1983) was chosen because it is one of the most widely used models to study how stress is managed and perceived within the context of intimate relationships. It provides a framework to understand how the stressors officers face can affect their coping strategies, their intimate partner, and their relationship. It also acknowledges the importance of the intimate partner relationship for how officers may manage work-related stressors.



According to Boss (2002), family stress is a process of family change rather than simply an event or situation that happens in or to a family. Her definition of stress includes the notion that stress is an upset in the balance of family harmony, and that families cope with stress as a method of restoring equilibrium or balance (Boss, 1987). The model of family stress management she developed includes the source of stress (internal or external) and the type of stress (episodic or situational, predictable or unexpected, volatile or non-volatile, clear or ambiguous).

Adaptation to stress is an important component of the Double ABC-X model, which Hill offers also referred to as coping (McCubbin & Paterson, 1983). Coping determines the level of effect the stress has on an individual or family unit. According to Boss (2002), coping is defined as the “process of managing a stressful event or situation by the family unit without any detrimental effects on any member of the family” (p. 79). It is important to note that although coping style is sometimes considered to be part of one’s personality traits (Beutler et al., 2003), it has been argued that coping mechanisms should be considered transitory and can change depending on the situation or stressor event. Coping skills can be seen as a means of adaptation to try to balance the distress experienced. The same coping skill can be seen as either positive or negative, depending upon the context and the degree to which it is effective. Positive coping skills help to get through situations at nearly the same level as those who do not have the disadvantage while negative coping skills, however, may provide short-term relief or distraction, but ultimately worsen our disadvantage (Hill, 1949).

The coping literature includes many extensive reviews (e.g., Edge & Sherwood, 2003; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004) that have attempted to identify categories of coping strategies that are most likely to result in positive or healthy outcomes, or contribute to negative or unhealthy

outcomes. For example, Zautra and colleagues (1996) proposed four categories: Active (taking action, exercising restraint or planning), Avoidance (denial, using substances such as drugs or alcohol and mental disengagement), Support (seeking instrumental or emotional support), and Positive Cognitive Restructuring (positive reinterpretation, humour, and acceptance). Theorists have noted that the effectiveness or success of coping strategies are dependent upon the characteristics of the context and the fit between that context and the various types of coping strategies chosen (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). As noted above, the same behaviour or coping strategy can have either positive or negative implications that are dependent upon a given situation.

Research has shown that police officers demonstrate a variety of common coping skills, such as avoidance or denial of the stressor event, physical fitness, taking time off work, taking up a hobby, and the use of humour (Boss, 2002, Kirschman 2007 & 2009). Alcohol consumption, self-care, counselling, therapy, or religious support are also some common examples (Krischman, 2007, 2009). Coping behaviours are as individual as the officers themselves; however, in order for officers and their families to cope successfully with the demands of law enforcement outlined above, they need to adopt a coping style that adequately meets his/ hers needs. If the officer and/or their intimate partner are equipped to deal effectively with the work-related stress of policing, it is likely that their relationship may not suffer from these stressors. Similarly, if officers and their partners are not coping effectively, policing stressors may take a serious toll on their relationship. Some research has been done on the coping mechanisms officers use to deal with work-related stress. The next section of this review addresses these coping mechanisms and their potential impact on intimate partner relationships.

### **Stress Management & Intimate Partner Relationships**

Numerous studies suggest that the intimate partners of officers absorb a large portion of the daily episodic stress and emotional distress that officers experience (Roberts & Levenson, 2001). Officers' self-reported emotional stress and negative emotions are significantly associated with their partner's reported rates of family conflict including yelling, withdrawal behaviours, and the use of threats (Burke, 1993). To add insult to injury, police officers are trained in their academies to avoid displaying emotion because on the streets it can be seen as a weakness and often offenders will use this advantage against the officer (Burke, 1993). Officers must suppress their emotions during their work day, which may contribute to difficulty expressing emotions appropriately during interactions with intimate partners (Brown & Grover, 1998; Nordlicht, 1979). Partners may become frustrated by the lack of expression, which may have a negative impact on the relationship, the health of the partner and/or the officer, and the couple's social life (Wu, 2009). Officers who experience difficulty with emotional expression, especially at home during regular interactions with their partners, are at higher risk for developing anti-social behaviours such as swearing and in some cases, physical aggression (Alexander & Walker, 1996; Goodman, 1990; Kirschman, 2007; Wu, 2009).

An early study looking at police burn out by Jackson and Maslach (1982) reported that when exhausted officers arrived at home after their shift, they were more likely to bring stress home and engage in negative behaviours. According to the reports of their intimate partners, the officers were tense, angry, and irritable (Jackson & Maslach, 1982). Although officers reported feeling listless and exhausted, they were unable to fall asleep and stay asleep (Jackson & Maslach, 1982). In this same study, women who were married to officers who suffered from burnout were less satisfied than with their spouses' jobs compared to officers that did not

identify as burnt out. The couple also reported pulling away from family and friends, along with a decrease in social activities and less couple time. Instead, the officers spent their off duty time alone and isolated. In their study, Jackson and Malasch (1982) found that wives of officers were more likely to seek out emotional support from family, friends, or support groups while their spouses tended to utilize negative coping behaviours. These results suggested that communication between couples was positively correlated with greater relationship satisfaction (Jackson & Maslach, 1982). Not surprisingly, couples who reported relying on substance abuse as a coping mechanism reported much lower levels of marital satisfaction (Jackson & Maslach, 1982).

Although this study was completed thirty years ago, it identified a number of important coping behaviours used by both officers and their partners. However, this early study relied on a checklist inventory, an approach which has since been critiqued in the literature as missing out on meaning-focused coping (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). The methodology of using open-ended interviews, which provide rich data on personal meaning and subjective experience, has been recommended instead. This study also interviewed male officers and their female spouses only, a serious limitation in light of the growing number of female officers noted above. Lastly, this study focused narrowly on the effects of burnout, implying that the officers included has already become “too stressed” to function in their role as officers.

More recently, Kirschman (2007) used a mixed methods approach which included both qualitative and quantitative data to better understand the coping strategies and styles that officers and their partners utilized. She found that many officers work out before or after their shifts as they feel it relaxes them (Kirschman, 2007). Many police units also organize police only sports

teams such as baseball, hockey, and football. This not only allows for officers to connect with each other outside of work, but also helps them “blow off some steam” (Kirschman, 2007).

Kirschman also identified taking time off as an important stress management tool; many officers have secluded cabins where they can hunt, fish, snowmobile, or skidoo (Kirschman, 2007). In addition, some officers reported they used an alcoholic beverage or a cigar after a shift to help them relax (Kirschman, 2007, 2009). The strength of Kirschman’s work was that she interviewed both officers and their partners; however, her sample was limited to American officers and their families, and focused primarily on male officers. Unfortunately, she also did not include information on sample size, or describe the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Lastly, she did not address the implications of different stress management strategies for the couple relationship.

A study in 2004 conducted by Kerkkanen, Kuiper, and Martin evaluated how the use of humour was related to stress-related health outcomes in law enforcement officers. Kerkkanen and colleagues found that the physical and cardiovascular health of officers was unrelated to the use of humour. However, this study was limited in that it focused only on humour, which was measured by self-report and peer ratings. The sample was limited to officers in a supervisory role, and did not examine how humour may have affected officers’ relationships with family members.

Research also suggests that family relationships can offer a source of support and contribute to positive coping by officers. For example, family support was found to an important protective factor against suicide in a study of Norwegian police officers (Burke & Mikkelsen, 2007). This study found that officers who reported low levels of familial support and emotional

satisfaction were more likely to engage in suicide ideation, and that officers who were more satisfied in their home lives were less likely to report suicidal thoughts (Burke & Mikkelsen, 2007). Both male and female officers were included in this study; however, intimate partner perspectives were not included.

In summary, although some studies have described coping strategies of police officers, they have focused on officers as individuals, and did not often take the perspective of their partner into account. In addition, the majority of these studies took a quantitative rather than qualitative approach. A qualitative approach would provide officers and their partners with the opportunity to discuss the elements of police work that cause the greatest stress for them and their family, as well as the meaning and implications of their stress management strategies as individuals and as a couple. There is little research to date on Canadian officers or their partners. To address these gaps in the literature, the present study investigated the sources of stress and stress management strategies from the perspective of Canadian officers and their intimate partners. Couples where one or both partners are officers were included. The present study took a narrative approach in order to provide an in-depth picture of how policing and intimate partner relationships influence one another. Ultimately, it is hoped that this information will guide the training and support of new and continuing officers and their partners in dealing with policing stressors.

## Chapter 3

### Methods

Narrative inquiry has long been recognized as “a significant mode of human communications, a bearer of culture, and a potentially profound and far-reaching educational methodology” (Moore, 1998) among many academic fields. Narrative stories are used frequently by social scientists to emphasize the subject’s voice regarding the area of inquiry. For this reason, this present study utilized a narrative approach. In many cultures, storytelling is a familiar tool of exchanging information as it highlights past experiences, not only positive but also negative. Stories are often used to teach future generations and encourage them to learn a life lesson of some kind. Stories connect people that may not ever meet, yet share a common experience or life event (Hu et al., 2012). While the present study included narrative accounts of officers and their spouses from one community only, because of the shared experiences of police officers in general, officers in other communities may be able to find similarities based on shared situations. Charon (2006) defines narratives as “stories with a teller, a listener, a time course, a plot, and a point.” In this case the point was simple; how do officers and their spouses cope with the job of policing and what (if any) are their methods of coping?

According to Catherine Kohler Riessman (1993) the narrative approach does not adhere to a ‘one size fits all approach’ both in terms of subject matter and academic field. While popular in the social research field, it is widely accepted across many fields because of its ability to delve deep into the subject matter because of the emphasis placed on the respondent’s views which are presented as they are relayed to the researcher, direct and unfiltered. Narrative language is a form of storytelling, where the researcher is merely the mode of transportation (Kohler Riessman, 1993) and how the respondents explain their story using their own contexts, which is an integral

part of qualitative data that is often missed in quantitative data collection. Respondents' narratives are "first-hand" (Kohler Riessman, 1993, p. 2) accounts of what is being investigated by the researcher; their views and how they understand and explain their own accounts is the crux of the narrative approach. In the case of this project on how officers and their spouses understand and manage 'stress,' in order to assist other families, it is key that their perspective is reported as natural as possible. Their personal stories are the data. Kohler Riessman continues to explain that personal narratives refer to "talk organized around consequential events" (1993, p. 3). Again, for the purpose of this study the couples are asked directly what the potential consequence(s) of policing are and how the couples manage such consequences. The exchanges they provide are vital in terms of their experiences but also how they interpret these experiences and relate them back to policing in general.

Another key aspect of the narrative approach is researcher positioning (Clandinin, 2007; Elliott, 2005; Kohler Riessman, 1993). In the case of this research, I am extremely embedded in the work, personally and professionally, which most definitely impacts not only my perspective, but also the relationship I have with the couples interviewed. Hollingsworth (2005) discusses the relationship between participant(s) and the researcher in terms of trust, difference etc. and how this relationship contributes to learning. The nine couples in this study were thrilled to participate as they were aware of the gaps in present literature, they were motivated both by my perceived non-threatening positioning as an officer's spouse but they were also motivated to help teach future officers and their families how to cope with this line of work. Hollingsworth believed that learning can be gained specifically from narrative inquiry in the form of conversation. This study did just that. It asked officers and their spouses to talk about their experiences and how they have shaped their coping styles. Because of the information gleaned from the conversations, this study



and those narrative perspectives will add directly to the limited body of current research. Of course with narrative styles of data collection and analysis comes its own challenges. Hollingswoth (2005) admits that many discount narrative research because the methods of the study are not explicitly outlined in a “transparent” way to ensure readers are aware as to how the conclusions of the research were reached. I have made sure to outline those methods below to ensure that the research is considered valid.

### **Qualitative Validity**

Ensuring the rigor of narrative methods is essential to any qualitative research; characteristics of rigor include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility, or internal validity, was indicated in the present study as many of the main themes derived from the interviews were consistently present in each and every interview; for example, each officer and spouse interview spoke about the highly stressful time of partner assignment and shift work. Bias was limited, as each couple was presented with the same interview question in the same manner; however, it was acknowledged that because the researcher was embedded in the work, a personal frame of reference may have influenced the results. Transferability, or external validity, can be assessed by member checking, or asking interview participants to review and offer feedback on transcripts or themes. Member checking was not conducted in the present study, and this limitation is addressed in the discussion section. Transferability may have been limited by the homogeneity of the sample of officers and spouses who participated; this is also addressed in the discussion section. Dependability, or replicability of the work, was addressed by the high degree of commonality of experience and themes across respondents, suggesting that saturation may have been achieved. The final characteristic of qualitative rigor is confirmability, which can be assessed by the degree to which results could be confirmed and/ or

collaborated by others. This characteristic was indirectly addressed in the present research, as some of the themes and findings reflected previous work. Further confirmability needs to be provided by future research concerning police officers and their spouses in Canada.

### **Recruitment**

Using a narrative interview approach, this project asked both law enforcement officers and their spouses to describe policing in detail and to identify potential stressors and coping mechanisms used. Nine couples were selected using a targeted snowball sample which was primarily from officer to officer. While conducting interviews, officers and their spouses asked if they could suggest couples that they thought would be interested. Only two couples did not wish to participate in the study, one due to a difficult pregnancy and one officer did not think his civilian spouse would be interested in participating. Each couple was either married or co-habiting during the time of the study. In order for couples to be considered for the study, either one or both partners had to be either a retired or active duty police officer. Officers had all served for the same municipal police service located in a metropolitan city in Canada.

Officers and their spouses were given the option of where they preferred to be interviewed due to privacy, child care issues, convenience, etc. Eight of the interviews were conducted in the couple's home and one was completed at a local coffee shop at the request of the officer. The couple explained that they did not have an issue discussing their situation in public. When initial contact was made with one or both spouses, the researcher explained the nature of the research topic and interview details such as length and potential location. Time was given to the officer and spouse to speak to one another and discuss whether or not they were interested. In the follow up phone call which involved wither the officer or the couple, or at times both; any questions the couple had were answered, and informed consent and ethics

approval were discussed. This was also the time that the interview was arranged if the couple was interested in participating. At the time of the initial phone interview, some of the couples were aware that my husband is an officer; if they couple did not know at that time it was made known to them to ensure that officers and spouses give informed consent.

### **Interview Protocol**

All couples were given an informed consent letter outlining the research project. They were also given information about dropping out of the study, as well as information regarding the study's ethics protocols. Couples were also each given a brief demographic questionnaire to complete which included quantitative questions such as age, number of years of service, education level, etc. Couples were asked if they wanted to speak privately or alone; all couples preferred to speak together. The informed consent and demographic questionnaires were also filled out together. Couples were extremely accommodating and were very eager to share their stories in hopes that lessons can be learned in the future. Many officers and most partners explained that they would have benefited from this information when they had started.

The interviews ranged in length from forty-five minutes to an hour and eleven minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by hand by the lead researcher. Field notes were also taken and included as data with the transcripts. Data was kept secured, both password protected and in a filing cabinet for confidentiality. Officers and their spouses were only identified by number. Names were only used when officers or spouses contacted the researcher. Also during the initial phone interview, it was noted that the primary researcher was married to a police officer, giving couples the opportunity to decline if they felt uneasy about this information. None of the officers or spouses declined, and in fact, that information seemed to put officers at ease and more willing to trust the project. Financial compensation was not provided;

however, each participating couple was entered for a draw of a \$100 gift certificate for a local restaurant.

The interviews went well; both officers and spouses stated that they were happy to participate and felt comfortable dealing with a civilian that had a police connection as they feared that their responses could be twisted or misunderstood. Officers and spouses seemed at ease and comfortable while being interviewed. It was rare that probing questions were used as both couples had no difficulty talking about their experiences and sharing stories. This was the truest with the retired officers whose interviews were the longest in length. It was evident, however, that some areas of policing were more difficult to discuss and evoked more emotions. For example, when speaking about partners and politics, officers used more profanity and less joking comments than they did with other subject areas. While they did not appear angry, it was evident that these stressors were very real, even for the officers who were retired. There was no difference between active duty and retired officers when they were speaking about heated topic areas. The seemingly hostile mood quickly changed when a new subject was discussed. While responder bias was a considerable area of struggle in this project, officers and spouses presented as very pleased to participate; many couples used phrases such as “we have nothing to hide” or “we are an open book” when speaking and were all happy to be recorded. Having direct knowledge of policing seemed to have been a resiliency factor in this instance as opposed to a risk.

### **Researcher Situation**

As previously discussed, as I myself am quite embedded in the research, precautions were made to ensure that the results spoke for themselves without my bias; however, my presence alone during the interviews could impact the couples. This bias also could have acted as

a benefit as couples may have seen me as playing ‘for the same team’ and felt safe and secure speaking with me.

### **Participants**

Participants were 9 police couples (one or both spouses were a member of a police service). Of the nine couples, eight included a male only officer spouse, and one couple included were both active Service members. This percentage of male to female officers is fairly representative of the Service in general where approximately 14% of sworn officers are female (Winnipeg Police Service, 2005). Informed consent and a demographic questionnaire were filled out by both spouses. Demographic information is summarized in Table 1.1

### **Data Coding & Analysis**

The initial open-ended question that was posed was: “Can you please talk about how (Officer)’s job affects your relationship (if at all) and if so, how you each deal with the strain. This would include how you each individually cope and if there are any ways that you cope as a team.” Couples were asked to be as specific as possible and to use as much detail as possible. The question also asked about different aspects such as social, emotional, physical, and behavioural aspects. The couple could speak for as little or as long as they wanted and were free to tell personal stories about specific instances or could maintain a more general stance if they preferred. Each of the interviews was audio recorded and once the data had been transcribed, a narrative analysis approach was followed using a similar approach to Becker (1997) in her study of how adults manage disruption in their lives. Becker (1997) explained that “narratives of disruption are people’s efforts to integrate disruption and its aftermath with prevailing cultural sentiments” (p. 15). This was also true in the context of stress and coping; in life there are

stressors (disruptions) which are followed by the individual's effort to restore normalcy (Becker, 1997).

In Becker's work looking at reproductive health and women's experiences (1997) she interviewed 10 women and asked very broad, open ended questions regarding women's experiences with physical disabilities and their care experiences. The data analysis methods used in this present study were closely based on this approach. The main difference was that all analyses were done by the lead researcher by hand without the use of computer software. Similar to her study, interviews in the present study were audio recorded, transcribed, and transcripts were compared to the audio recordings to verify accuracy (Becker, 1997). Once the transcripts were reviewed, coding of the data began. Following Becker (1997), broad categories emerged from the interview questions. In the present study, these consisted of 1) source of stress and 2) means of coping. From these very broad categories, smaller subthemes were identified. For example, within the broad category of sources of stress, more subcategories such as policing partners and transfer time emerged. During the coding process, themes and subcategories were identified until all of the data had been coded and no new themes emerged. Following Becker (1997), categories were created and refined through an ongoing process of constant comparison while repetitiously going through the paper transcripts. This was also done to ensure the clarity and specificity of categories without unnecessary overlap or duplication of themes or categories.

Aspects of Riessman and Speedy's (2007) narrative approach were also used. They focussed on narratives as storytelling, in which stories can be used to inform, embrace, reassess, educate, engage, entertain, justify, or remember (Riessman & Speedy 2007). In their study, they began with a detailed literature review of previous narrative studies. Upon completion of the review, they began finding patterns in the previous literature. Once the main patterns emerged,

they were able to develop constructs moving from micro concepts into larger macro concepts that can be applied to a broader context (Riessman & Speedy, 2007) based on the initial individual responses.

Narrative analysis for the present study began with repeated readings of the transcripts and field notes for topical content to identify shared themes such as “social implications.” As this was an exploratory study and the first study of its kind in Canada, there were no specific expectations regarding the number of themes, other than the two posed in the question--sources of stress and aspects of coping. The main overarching themes pertaining to sources of stress consisted of: 1) policing culture; 2) job responsibilities; and 3) social implications. With each review of the transcripts, other subthemes became clear such as substance abuse, organizational stress, and physical stress. It was clear there were also a variety of smaller categories that applied to each of the larger themes such as overtime, partners, shift work, health, and nature of calls.

The themes and subcategories were organized like a family tree chart on a large piece of paper, with each subcategory connected to a broader main category, while still being connected to the other smaller categories. When a quote or a story was identified to fit into a category, it was highlighted in a color specific to its couple number, cut from the transcript and adhered to the category. Since many officers and couples spoke about the same struggles, the colour coding helped to ensure reliability and avoid mix ups once the quotes were cut from the printed transcripts. I developed this technique to avoid mixing up responses due to the saturation of some categories. For a number of subcategories, there was a great deal of data saturation where each of the couples mentioned the area as a significant stressor. While going through the printed transcripts initially I read them just for content. The second, third, and fourth notations were

made pertaining to stressors or coping mechanisms. Upon noting the saturation in some categories it seemed valuable to colour code them in order to identify each couple who contributed a statement. While reading the transcripts after the fourth time, applicable quotes were selected and color coded to ensure they matched the colour coding of the couple to avoid any mix ups. Rigor was assessed during this process of building themes and subcategories; a final reading was done of each transcript to ensure that quotes included in each category were homogenous and coherent.

When coding couple's responses concerning coping strategies, there were fewer overarching categories due to the specific nature of the question; the two that emerged were family-oriented and individual-oriented coping. Couples provided stories, anecdotes, and examples of their methods of coping and how they have helped mitigate the stress of policing. While some couples were the only ones to mention certain aspects of coping, all specific strategies were each included. Some of the common words that were used when speaking about the stress were "minimize," "compartmentalize," "sacrifice," and "internalize." This is interesting to note as most officers indicated that they did not feel the job caused them any undue stress initially when speaking. However, when reviewing the transcripts the meaning of these terms reflected the process of 'coping', indicating that officers and their partners experienced and expressed the stress of policing in their own unique way.



## Chapter 4

### Results

In general, the responses across couples were similar, with a few couple couples having very different opinions. The majority of couples that were interviewed stated that the job itself did not play a significant role in their lives and remained “just a job”; however, one couple explained that the job stress was at times, extremely significant and debilitating “what we are doing is not working.” The main theme of “policing culture” consisted of three smaller themes: party atmosphere, policing politics, and social implications. The main theme of party atmosphere included areas such as alcohol as a coping mechanism- both positive and negative and infidelity. The second subtheme of politics included areas such as shift work, overtime, partners, and transfer policies. The final subtheme of social implications included themes of maintaining a social life with and without officers, family connections in policing, and family obligations.

There were a total of fifteen sources of stress that emerged from the data. These fifteen areas were part of larger themes that included individual stressors (substance misuse, health etc), organizational stressors (partners, politics, nature of the calls), and familial stress (isolation, shift work, overtime, family pressures). Of these individual sources of stress, some were specific to officers such as the issue of partners; however, the impact of the stressor was clearly experienced by both officer and spouse. This was true for every category; there was not one theme where both officer and spouse did not share an opinion.

#### **Boys Just Wanna Have Fun**

The first theme that emerged from the data was the issue surrounding substance misuse, particularly alcohol, and how it was closely linked to policing culture. While some officers and

their spouses identified social drinking as a coping mechanism, for many officers, primarily the more senior or retired officers, this category was an unhealthy coping mechanism that quickly became a stressor itself.

The difference between policing culture of the past and the reality of the current lifestyle was evident from most couples. In each case the days of old came up, and officers talked about some of their first-hand experiences regarding drinking and partying. Each of the younger, more junior officers said family was a priority and they were not interested in participating in what they called “anti-social behaviour”. One currently serving male officer with a great deal of responsibility and experience spoke quite candidly about his excessive drinking that led to the breakdown of his first marriage. He is now married for a second time and admits that he is not prepared to make the same mistakes he did previously. He spoke about the drinking and partying that was common place early on in his career. “I was married before... I’ve been there and done that and I know what makes a relationship and what doesn’t and I know very well what it takes to make a relationship work.” He explained that when he started in the early 90s things were different. It was not uncommon for a shift to drink a fair bit together all evening and then drive home in the early morning. This of course was a recipe for disaster as not only could officers still be under the influence but they have already worked a full shift before drinking and celebrating meaning these officers have been awake for almost 24 hours. The officer did not speak about this specific incident but did discuss that during his early years as an officer, stories that like were not uncommon. When he spoke about the past he used words like “cultural acceptance” because this behaviour was an accepted part of the job; after a long tour (the 4-6 days an officer works) officers need to relax and blow off steam. However, after shift social gatherings have evolved into a more relaxed atmosphere where officers may have a couple of drinks and then go home, or

officers don't get together at all and go home immediately after work. The officer explained that if officers were caught driving while under the influence without a doubt they would be fired, even arrested and charged. The rules are different now and reckless behaviour is not tolerated the way it once was. The new culture of policing has turned away from the dangerous excessive drinking and now places higher importance on respect, safety, and professionalism on and off shift. While it is clear that there has been a paradigm shift over the years, the party lifestyle of the previous policing era is long gone making way for a more mature, family centred, and respectful organization. Even the name change from "*police force*" to "*police service*" highlights the shift to a more inclusive policing strategy. The retired officers and their spouses used both terms interchangeably, however, the active duty officers and their spouses, only referred to policing as a service.

A younger less senior officer with a civilian wife and a young child also spoke about how the police service has made a shift from the "boys club" from earlier days. While he admits that he himself was never really into partying as an officer or even before, he is fully aware of many stories and even working with senior partners that engaged in the party lifestyle. He explained that the shift from the police service has come from hiring policies such as hiring older officers that are educated, and are established as opposed to in previous years where officers were hired right out of high school. He attributes the life experience and maturation of the new officers as part of the decrease in the party/ drinking police mentality.

This officer admitted he does not often participate in what he feels is a "party lifestyle" and suggested that the change in what once was common practice means he does not feel obligated to participate as he may have felt if he served as an officer fifteen years ago. His priority now is his wife and child and he can feel comfortable allowing them to be his priority

where that may not have been the case years ago. He felt this cultural shift acted as a protective factor. If he does not feel the pressure to stay out late and engage in activities he is uncomfortable doing and instead can be home with his family, as he has indicated, his family life is stronger.

Two retired officers also agreed with the evolving of the police service into a more mature and family oriented organization, noting that was not always how it was. “So many of your friends in that situation where the relationship disbanded because a lot of those guys, even your mentors, were heavy drinkers.” One of the retired officers recalled the “wild parties” at the lounge that was actually owned at the time by the police association in their community. He explained that while he and his wife had three children with only one income, he rarely went to the lounge due to a lack of financial freedom. He spoke about the parties there as well as the excessive drinking and even having prostitutes there for the officer’s enjoyment. For that officer, he stated that his priority was his family. On rare occasions he would have a couple of drinks with his coworkers at the end of the tour but he always made it home shortly after his shift was completed. The thought of seeing coworkers with spouses at home hooking up with prostitutes was upsetting to him and he did not feel comfortable in those situations. “That was way out of my comfort zone, I didn’t agree with that.”

As the officer indicated, simply witnessing others engage in these behaviours was a stressor to him and since he discussed these feelings with his wife, it became a stress to her in the form of worry, doubt, and mistrust of her own husband knowing that other officers could cheat on their spouses so publicly. The job of policing is difficult enough but even more so when combined with an additional area of stress as a result of partying and infidelity which presented at that time as quite common place. For this couple in particular it was something they openly

discussed with each other and were very open and honest about it; however, not all couples excel at communication within the relationship. Having to lead a double life while you are at work and at home can place excessive and unnecessary stress on a person and a relationship. As the officer indicated this was in fact extremely stressful and was only resolved when he and his wife terminated the friendship with the officer.

Another retired officer spoke about the same police lounge but his perspective was different. He and his spouse used to go together on “payday Thursdays” because for them it was social and it was a fun night out that they did together. They both acknowledged that there were some things that went on that they would not participate in, but felt that all in all it was a night out and they were happy to go and socialize with friends together. The civilian spouse described the atmosphere as being safe and inviting. She knew everyone there and would often just go because they had the best music and she and her girlfriends would dance all night while the officers would socialize and talk about work. Both the officer and his wife spoke about the time when the club became too uncomfortable for them to frequent. A fellow officer who the couple was friends with had a couple of girlfriends on the side. The spouse described that it became too difficult to watch their friend cheat on his wife, who was also friends with the couple. “We couldn’t deal with it anymore and that was it.” They stopped going to the lounge and terminated the relationship with the officer.

Similar to the previous couple, this act of hiding someone else’s infidelity was far too stressful for the couple on a moral and social level. For them, it could only be resolved with the termination of the relationship. The couple expressed that their coping strategy was to eliminate the stress entirely. For them, family values trumped the friendship with the officer and felt that they could not be a part of the husband’s deceit.

### **Substance Misuse**

While a couple of the officers admitted that they struggled with alcohol, one officer in particular had talked about alcohol as a protective factor. Due to the shift work interfering with his circadian rhythm, at times he needed alcohol to help calm his nerves and help him sleep. As it is understood that alcohol is a depressant, this would make sense; however, using alcohol to help someone sleep can lead to a number of concerns such as alcohol dependency, liver damage, or alcoholism. He recounted that “your supervisors pulled you aside and opened a desk drawer, pulled a jug out put it on the table got some coffee mugs out and go home, pass out and have a good sleep and all will be well in the world.” For him, this was an aspect of coping that he was able to identify and recognize. He understood that it was a dangerous tool but found that using other sleep aids did not help. The second officer stated that the “drinking was something (he) did for many years.” It was not until someone had recognized it, that he became aware and stopped. He believed that the creation of the wellness officer position within the service helped him realize and change his behaviour before it was too late.

While for many, limited alcohol use can be a healthy coping mechanism, for others it can quickly turn into something dangerous and even fatal. In this case the officer used alcohol as a coping strategy that unfortunately turned into what he considered excessive. This presents itself as a very slippery slope, while in many cases officers do use alcohol or even sleeping pills to help them sleep in order to gear up for their next shift with good intentions, it can easily become a problem without any warning signs. As the officer admitted, perhaps he would never have received help if someone had not been attuned to his growing struggles. With only one wellness officer for an entire service it may be difficult to ensure that all officers are receiving the prevention, education, and awareness training to avoid such difficulties.

While alcohol in this case seemed as though it was a risk factor, for one retired officer he spoke about alcohol being a coping mechanism in regards to getting to sleep while working shift work. He spoke about going to the park after shift to have a couple of drinks (other officers spoke of this as well) but in his case, he would need the alcohol to help him sleep. He found the rotating shift work very difficult and could only fall “dead asleep” if he had multiple drinks. He explained that in his situation (single, no children) he was able to come home under the influence and “pass out” until he woke himself up. He also explained that for many officers and supervisors this was common place. Another retired officer commented on how he felt that alcohol was seen but not really acknowledged as an issue among police officers and the executive, that’s a coping skill and it’s still around probably more than the police executive will ever admit but the big and maybe the biggest part of it is administrative stress from my own experiences or from supporting other people and getting screwed by upper management.”

### **Here We Go Again**

While not every officer and spouse interviewed felt that policing itself was stressful, each of the nine couples commented that one of the most stressful aspect in policing was the issue of transfer time. This period happens once a year and typically in the spring. In many police services, after a certain amount of time, officers either voluntarily or are mandated to transfer to a new unit. This is done to keep officers current and to prevent stagnant and ‘bored’ officers. Transferring can also mean that offices get to build their skills in a specialty unit such as organized crime, homicide, drug units, K9, and the tactical unit. While transferring can be done to further an officer’s career, it can also be for his/ her protection. In some of the specialty units on a police service such as Homicide, the hours tend to be very arduous. The shifts typically range from Monday to Friday for 8 hours; however, murders do not also fall within that specific

time frame. Officers are often on call on evenings and weekends to ensure that if a murder occurs, an officer responds immediately. Also, officers can be called on their days off if there is a need. This can be difficult for officers to manage as they may work a 30 hour shift and just as they get home to get some rest, they are called again back to a homicide call. This unpredictability can be extremely difficult to accommodate over a period of time so policy indicates that there is a maximum term (usually three years) that officers can remain on that unit.

Mandatory transfers also act to protect officers' mental health. An officer may have a life change (birth of a child) where a different shift (for example Monday to Fridays) would better accommodate child care. Transfers may also benefit officers who are working in a unit that is psychologically challenging, such as working in the child sexual exploitation unit where officers are required to view hundreds of thousands of images of child pornography. For these reasons, it makes sense that transferring to and from different units is in the officer's best interest. However, as each of the officers indicated, this "transfer time" is by far the most significant stressor in a police officer's career.

Each officer highlighted this stress in detail including one active duty officer who explained that when he made the switch from A side to B side, it was the most stress that he had experienced, until he switched to a different unit and that was stressful as well. His wife spoke about how her husband was literally on the phone all day and night and when he wasn't talking to someone, he was emailing or sending them text messages. They both discussed that for the few months prior to the transfer they experienced high levels of stress in preparation for the change and the few months after the transfer when they were adjusting to it were the worst. Then in a year it changed again because other officers on the team may have reached their maximum time and unfortunately you have to go through the whole process again. In this officer's case he



worked with a number of colleagues that all transferred to a new shift at the same time. What they did was basically create their own shift because they knew the process would be seamless and effective. “The whole back office jumped ship and moved into sex crimes.” He punctuated this point by explaining that the job is the best when you are in a team and an area you love; the officer and his friends created the perfect environment because in his opinion, “you wanna work with the best.”

One young officer, the most junior that was interviewed, talked about being happy; he has not yet transferred but is dreading the impending decision. Just as officers are getting comfortable with the job, they are told to leave. Many want to work their way into plain clothes (detective work) which is seen as elite; however, many officers love the general patrol unit and are happy to continue to develop their skills on the street before making the move to detective work. This officer was not sure what he wanted to do yet; even before he started his 5 years in general patrol he was already being asked what his next move was. He explained that having to always think about that was a significant stressor. Not wanting to make a mistake in your choice but also not wanting to be ill prepared for your new position is quite a heavy load that an officer has to carry during that three to five year span.

### **Movin’ On Up--Or Is It?**

Promotions in policing are very different from the ‘normal’ promotion competitions. In policing they are score based and there are a number of requirements that need to be met. To even be considered to move from Constable to Sergeant you need to have at least nine years of service; however, seniority is based on a numeric score and an officer with eleven years of service has the best score in this category. Once you are eligible in terms of seniority there is a written test that you must pass. The test is a memorization of all police policies and procedures.

It is dry and all memory based. Officers are advised that they should be spending at least three to four hours a night studying and six to eight hours a day studying in addition to working shift work and having a family. Once the exam is complete and you have a high enough score you move on to the next phase which is a peer review component. The officer provides a list of three to five fellow officers including coworkers and sergeants that they have worked with over the last three to five years. These officers are brought in and are asked a series of questions about the promotion candidate. At this time, Human Resources also selects coworkers on a random basis to serve as character witnesses. Once these are complete, the candidates' scores are compiled and they have a final interview with the competency board review panel. There are six competencies that the candidate is being evaluated on in the interview.

Some of the officers who were interviewed had never applied for a promotion but had seen fellow officers study and stress over the process. One of the retired officers explained that studying for the Sergeant's exam was painful and after doing it once he refused to study for it again. He described the whole process as "horrible" and talked about the hours and hours of studying, buying specialized tapes to increase memory capacity. But the worst part was the interview. He described the panel interview and how this process was a struggle for him because he was shy by nature. "People's lives fall apart when they don't get that promotion."

For one active duty officer who was motivated by promotions he explained that he intentionally increased his stress levels by taking difficult positions in order to gain the experience and favour for an upcoming promotion. This of course, did not come without stress, as he explained:

"I went to that high pressure job, because I wanted to get promoted. So I went to the staffing position, and I worked like a dog. Working through my holidays, I'll tell you; we were on

holidays in Florida for 5 weeks, 4 weeks two hours a day for three or four weeks solid I was on the computer working while she was on the beach.”

Not only did the promotion competition affect the officer and increase his level of stress and anxiety, it also had a direct impact on their relationship while they were on a vacation together. This is a clear example of how the stress of policing is not always a direct effect of the service work, but can be a result of policies.

A retired officer spoke very highly of his experiences with promotion as that was an area he excelled in. While it took hours of studying and sacrifice, he was awarded every promotion competition he was engaged in. This meant that he was able to work in any area he wanted. The officer explained that he hated shift work and did not like working in a general patrol capacity. He preferred solving homicides and other crimes against people. During his almost three decade career with his Service, he hardly worked any general patrol. But when asked about his overall thoughts about how the promotions are handled he felt that the procedure is “very disruptive, it’s ridiculous.” His wife had commented on the other stress that came from his promotions that did have an impact on their relationship She had described a situation where he husband was mentoring many officers throughout his career due to his knack of the promotion process. As a result he was getting calls at all hours of the day requesting assistance. One case in particular, the officer was helping a female apply for her Sergeant’s exam and the female officer began to act inappropriately towards the mentor. The female was calling and texting late at night to which the spouse had finally told her husband that it needed to stop. The female spouse also talked about the general time commitment regarding promotions and how at times her husband was unavailable to her and their children.

**“The Thing That Stressed Me Out the MOST Was Working With Some A—hole”**

Police services around the world operate with very different guidelines including the area of single or double crew cars. Some police services in Canada operate using single officer cars, meaning that while officers are on shift and responding to calls for service they are alone in their vehicles. For example, officers with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police operate their patrol cars alone. This means that at any given time, in many situations officers need to respond to emergencies alone. They have radio contact with their coworkers; however, they often go into dangerous situations alone. For the officers interviewed for this project they are among the many municipal services that utilize partner patrol cars or two person cars. Aside from certain circumstances, more often than not the officers are working in pairs. While this strategy increases officer safety it also increases officers' levels of stress due to potential personality conflicts. In every one of the nine interviews officers stated that the “partner issue” was a significant area of stress for them. In many cases this stress did impact the relationship with their spouse at home because, “the best thing you could possibly do is get with a partner that likes to work the same as you because you look around and see nobody else is doing the work you're doing so now, when I come home, that's what I'm saying to her. ‘You won't f-ing believe what these guys do!’ ”

For some officers the period of stress can last all year long if an officer feels as though they are ‘stuck’ with their partner until there is a transfer time. Officers and spouses interviewed spoke about the dangers of being partnered with someone they did not respect, both in terms of a safety perspective but also in terms of dependability and work ethic. When the subject of partners came up in the interviews, the mood tended to change in a significant and notable way. Initially, officers and spouses presented comfortable with me and were able to joke, laugh, and

seemed at ease. There was a marked difference in the officers' mannerisms and language when talking about partners. Profanity was used a lot more as were insults or name calling. The issue of ill-fitting partners is a heavy area of stress due to the risk and danger involved. Officers and spouses understand that the job itself is dangerous; having a partner is supposed to help mitigate that risk but when a partner is less competent, it places the other officer and the entire team at risk.

Many officers spoke about less than adequate officers being pushed through academy whether it is to satisfy quotas or even nepotism. One retired officer spoke about how when working with a partner who was unable to speak English with fluency there was a shooting that took place and the centralized dispatch unit was unable to send back up because they could not understand the location the officer was giving. In a situation like that, speed and accuracy are non-negotiable. The officer stated that no one was killed; however, with bullets literally flying at the scene, it could have been very different.

This sentiment was echoed by another active service member who was also frustrated at the sub-par recruits that were being passed at the academy, "You get guys that don't belong there, guys that are barely scraping through the academy yet for some reason the service pushes them through and they'll do anything to keep them." Another active general patrol officer stated flat out that "working with people that are just useless drives me nuts. It's the worst." This especially upsets officers who had seen good cadets not make it to academy due to certain quotas.

In addition to the dangers associated with working with an ill equipped partner, there is the issue of personality conflicts. Because "you spend more time with your partner than you do your family" one officer explained that having a partner you respect and trust is important, and

one of the most important coping elements for the job. If you have a partner who is risky then both the officer and spouse will experience extreme stress including sleepless night for the spouse while the officer is working. One officer's wife spoke about the time her husband was working early in his career in general patrol and there were guys on the shift who she had heard about that had reputations for not doing their job properly. She worried about her husband's safety but also if there was a serious incident that her husband would have to take the fall because of his partner making a serious mistake. There is no room for error in policing. "The kind of partner where you worry about your spouse's safety, that's scary." This area of discussion was one where officers became very direct in their comments and at times used colourful language to articulate their frustration. According to one officer who dealt recently with a situation,

"Like you can have a crazy call and we had one a couple weeks ago where you know damn well that if it hadn't been us on that call, there would have been a guy that committed a very serious crime that wouldn't have gotten caught because nobody had the nuts to drive or just due diligence. They don't care enough because it doesn't directly affect them they go right home."

With regard to comments being made about lazy partners, one very soft spoken retired officer was quite animated in comparison to the rest of his comments: "The things that stressed me out the most was working with some a-hole, that stressed me out more than anything."

### **Stupidity Runs the Ranks**

In any job, there is a guiding politic. There is bureaucracy and seemingly nonsensical policies and rules that workers must grow accustomed to. This of course is no different with law

enforcement. The structure of most police services is paramilitary meaning that direction comes in the form of orders from the top down; this would be similar to any large corporation. The Chief of Police would be the same as a Chief Executive Officer, the police superintendents would be akin to Vice Presidents, and officers and employees would be the front line staff. One issue that differs between a multimillion dollar company and any police service is the public scrutiny. Even publicly traded companies are not nearly as concerned with the satisfaction of the public as law enforcement agencies. Granted, they are funded largely in part by taxes; however, you would be hard pressed to find any organization that is consistently criticized on a constant and ongoing basis. Similar to the military, police are given orders and are expected to carry out those orders. Where the two organizations differ is that military front line soldiers understand their rank and comply with doing as they are directed; they have no authority in the matter and act accordingly.

However, law enforcement officers *are* the authority. They tell people what to do, what not to do, take away rights, make decisions for people in potentially life and death decisions, and punish those that they feel violate the law using officer discretion. Dealing with the police is a last resort. Because of the nature of the job, the type of person that is generally attracted to police work is not exceptionally comfortable or interested in taking orders; they prefer to be the ones giving the orders. This is even more pronounced when officers have years of experience and are used to being the last resort. This can make managing a group of officers exceedingly difficult. In many cases, when new rules or policies come in to place and are handed down to the officers, like a mandatory increase in the number of tickets handed out, many general patrol officers will simply ignore the command.

This was a second area of great stress for some of the officers who again, spoke candidly about their feelings towards the politics of policing. Officers discussed the frustration of dealing with supervisors who no longer take calls, and have not for a long period of time and have forgotten how to do police work. Officers spoke that as good as they and their partner were, who they had as a supervisor was also very important to an officer's level of stress. One active duty officer offered his opinion as to why there are gaps in leadership

“I mean in any line of work if you're working with a bunch of people in government jobs, they are the textbook example. You have a whole bunch of people that are all in a group getting paid roughly the same to do a job and nobody actually monitors them or brings about any consequences. If they work, they might get two items done in a day. But if they were paid by call, everybody would get lots done; everybody would be busting their --s working. Instead, everybody get in there and they get comfortable and they get lazy. They realize this work is actually work, and so they don't want to do too much of it. Yeah, so absolutely that drives me insane.”

The officer felt that managing staff and monitoring the number of calls taken on a shift and by which officers should be part of the role of upper management. The officer did not feel that was being done and explained that he and his policing partner and a couple other cars would be responsible for the majority of the work done in one shift. He explained that while officers are assigned to a call they must remain with that call until it is completed and cleared. Once they are free, dispatch gives them another call from the waiting calls in the queue. What some officers do is they will not clear the call as soon as it is completed and will wait for an 'easy' call to come in and they will offer to take that call. This is referred to a “stick handling.” While some officers are



racing from call to call, others are leisurely taking their time and picking and choosing. Supervisors are aware but do little to enforce any standards.

One officer explained that in general because it is a relatively small organization which comes with its own struggles such as favouritism or even bullying, “especially within the police service, it’s such a small world that there’s so much, for lack of a better term, bulls-t going on.” Another retired officer spoke about being bullied toward the end of his career which inevitably forced him to quit. “To get screwed at the very end was tough. They took something away from me. They took away my right to retire from this organization.” Even though the job is over, there are still residual stressors that affect the officer and his spouse today. The officer was told this by someone in Human Resources, despite having more than the required amount of skills and experience, the officer was considering a risk to hire. In his opinion people are put into supervisory positions who are not equipped to handle to demands and the responsibilities. He equated this to how some officers are put through despite not being qualified. According to this retired officer with almost 30 years of experience, he believes that there are mistakes being made in the promotion of officers regardless of rank.

Another soon to be retired officer also spoke about learning the “hard way” about the police service and how they can hurt their own officers without question. The officer spoke about his experiences learning this lesson and then passing the advice on to some of his younger officers. At the time he said, the younger officers did not believe him saying to him “it can’t be true.” Unfortunately, later they themselves were “stung” by the same service that is supposed to guide, teach, and protect them.

**“I Think I Felt Sorry for Him More Than Anything”**

Like with many jobs, there is the potential for overtime hours. How policing is different is that it is far more frequent and far more inconvenient when you are already operating on a shift work schedule. It is not uncommon, and is almost expected, that something will happen during a shift. After working a ten hour shift on patrol and getting ready to head back to the station, a call for service comes in that cannot be ignored or a seemingly simple case they are working on has now turned into something much more complicated and the officer must stay. In some cases (staying with a victim/ accused at the hospital) the officer can be relieved if there is a car available, but that is not always the case. Working overtime has financial benefits, but it can wreak havoc on an intimate relationship. Who will trade off with the spouse to get the children ready? How will the officer get enough sleep? Who will let the dog out? Overtime is unpredictable which makes it stressful for officers and their spouses. Policing is a twenty four hour a day job, and for some officers and their spouses, they can be at work for days at a time before coming home.

One retired officer spoke about working a 36 hour day while doing investigations. Knowing that detective work requires a lot of overtime, he and his wife discussed early on that overtime was a part of the job. Both he and his wife explained that seeing overtime as part of the job meant that there was no resentment towards it. He had said “(Shift work) adds a whole other level to the difficulty that you’re faced with being called. It can be really hard to deal with but again, you accept that. It comes with the territory and you accept it, embrace it, and have a plan.”

In their case it was a stress but they handled it as it came. Before the couple was married, they spoke a great deal about the work that was ahead of them. The officer explained that he was interested in seeking promotions and wanted to work primarily in the detective sector of the

service. His girlfriend understood that in order for him to achieve this, there would be great sacrifice. The couple agreed that in order for them to have the life they wanted, it would take the officer working overtime and unpredictable shifts, often leaving the spouse on her own. She stated that she accepted her role and embraced it. She explained that because of this foresight she was able to handle situations like shift work and missed family outings because they was what they discussed. This couple felt that crisis is always easier to handle when you have a plan to tackle it, and they knew there would be struggles so when it happened, they expected it which helped make it less stressful.

They did speak about other couples they knew that did not manage the stress as well, which led to the wife resenting the husband for taking overtime. In many cases, the job dictates the shifts, not the officer. Many times overtime cannot be avoided. Each of the couples interviewed spoke at length about the issue of overtime. While officers in general patrol have far less discretion when it comes to staying late; plain clothes or investigating officers have more 'wiggle room'.

For the one couple where both partners were active duty officers, they spoke about one summer in particular where they were both working investigations in different units. "The one Sunday we had off in a three month span, we were at the park and she got called, the one day we had off." They also spoke about working so much that they did not even see each other, which created a safety concern. While the male officer had been working over time, he came home briefly to sleep for two hours and shower and then needed to go back to work. His wife did not know he had been home and she began to panic thinking he was hurt or something had happened that kept him gone for two days: "I thought, oh my God, he hasn't been home yet." This couple also spoke about difficulties they faced when they were both working in detective work and were

subjected to call outs and overtime: “we’d be sitting in bed at two in the morning and a pager would go off, we both had pagers and we’d both be praying it was the other person’s pager.” Working shift work is hard enough, working overtime shift work is worse, and when both officers are working as officers, it can wreak havoc on a relationship. In their case, they openly discussed overtime which was an effective strategy was for them. “We made it clear right from the get go that if we were going to work a bunch of overtime, or when you knew it was coming up, then that’s okay, but if we have something set, then we say this is an off limit thing. You have to have a lot of communication.”

Some of the younger, more junior officers explained that due to financial freedom, they did not feel as though they “needed” to work overtime, where some officers might feel forced into taking it. Two in particular articulated that they did not feel as though they “needed” to work overtime: “you aren’t the type of person that needs the extra income. He is able to say no because we’re in a position where we don’t have to say yes.” Unfortunately not all officers are in that position and taking the overtime does result in stress at home. When asked about overtime, one high ranking patrol Sergeant stated that in the last two weeks, he had been called out (called to work on days off) four to five times out of eight to nine days off. His wife quickly commented, “Behind every good police officer is a good cop’s wife.” While she was able to joke about the amount of overtime her husband works, they both talked about the stress that it placed on the two of them as well as their relationship. They discussed that finding ways to justify it helped but it is still a significant stress: “you know it gets ridiculous when you get the phone call in the morning, the phone call right after supper, we were planning on watching a movie and no...” This was also a significant stressor for the family, spouse, and children as the idea of the officer ‘might’ get called out impacted how they managed their family time. One young couple

spoke about not being able to do certain things as a family for fear they would have to stop doing what they were doing so the officer could go in to work. The spouse explained that she got so frustrated that she decided she would do the family activities with her children and without her spouse. “That’s what I did basically just took the kids and went because we weren’t going to stay home just because he phone might ring.” She continued to explain that she felt sorry for her husband because just as she and the kids were “tucked into bed and were maybe just falling asleep, he would have to get up.” She indicated that happened often.

### **Peer Pressure Doesn’t End in High School”**

Historically, policing has earned its reputation as a boys club. The parties, the drinking, and the aggression make it a potpourri of gender stereotypes. When recruits enter the academy, they are told that their reputation is key. You are being judged and scrutinized every day without your knowledge. Other officers will know all about you long before you ever meet them. Of course, in academy, this hardly seems important to new recruits as they are more concerned with feeling like they’ve made it. They brag to friends and family that they can legally carry a gun, and shoot stuff, and arrest people. There is a sense of pride for the new officers and in academy they are flying pretty high. This all changes when they enter their station; they are reminded that they are the rookies and they tend to be somewhat humbled. It can be compared to middle school children riding pretty high in grade nine, until they have to leave their school to enter high school, and now they are back to being bullied by the mean Grade 12 kids. There is a lot of pressure for officers to make a name for themselves, they want to play on the hockey teams, they want to drink with the shift, and go out for wings. But this comes at a cost of course.

One senior officer spoke at great length about the pressure that young men and woman face as they leave the safety of academy and enter the mean streets of their community. He used

words like “demands,” “pressure”, and “struggle” when talking about junior officers making the transition from academy to policing. It should be noted these were words that were used by every officer interviewed when speaking about peer pressure; he explains that there is a lot of pressure when officers begin, due to the pressures of the organization. This of course is heightened for those officers that are career focused and feel that they want to move up the ladder quickly. Officers feel that if they hang out with the senior officers, it will help their chances of making it on to a plain clothes unit, and to some extent it’s true. What you know in policing is just as valuable and who you know. He felt that he himself started out that way until he realized that, “the job is just a job” and making a name for yourself by drinking and partying is not the way to earn a position in a unit.

One retired officer also spoke about peer pressure in the policing community. He was very direct in saying, “peer pressure doesn’t end in high school, it doesn’t.” He was referring to the pressures of fitting in and belonging with the guys by going out and drinking every night. He explained that he was a “go to work guy and a come home guy.” He was not interested in participating in the extracurricular activities as many others were; this did affect him as he found that he was not considered a social companion to a lot of the guys on his shift. He recalls many of those fun party guys back in the day, and also feels that where they are now is nowhere he would want to be. He feels he made the right decision but admits that not all officers are strong enough to make that distinction early on in their careers before it’s too late and they have a reputation they cannot shake. “If you’re a guy that’s susceptible to peer pressure, there’s plenty of opportunity to go down the wrong path.”

While conducting interviews, there was no shortage of officers and spouses that would tell stories about the officers; that had “crossed that line.” Every officer knows a few of those

officers, one retired officer had said that he knew guys like that, and would protect him and his family's values by not having the officer and his wife over as he knew the officer was cheating on his wife. He spoke about another colleague of his that got so caught up in the partying lifestyle and fitting in that he got involved with a notorious gang and subsequently lost his job. He believes that some of these guys are just inclined to party and abuse alcohol, drugs, and women whether they are a police officer or not, just that policing gives them more access and exposure. Many officers who did not feel that this stress applied to them, explained that it was because they were not interested in fitting in or belonging, their families were their priorities.

### **“The Job Will Change You--It Will”**

It is widely understood that the effects of witnessing traumatic events can lead to the development of adverse effects which can lead to PTSD. Much research has been done with military personnel; however, less is known about officers. These men and women are often the first on the scene, often before fire and paramedic crews. There is no shortage of horrific police officer stories that would make most people violently ill. For some, they share these stories openly almost akin to a badge of honour, or a good story to impress or gross out friends, while others keep them to themselves and don't wish to relive them. Often when the stories are retold they are done so in a humorous way as if to say, “You would not believe what I saw” but when you take a step back and listen to what is being retold without the humour, it is heartbreaking. Death, dismemberment, suicide, car accidents, drive by shootings and the worst of all- any death involving a child become so ‘normal’ for these officers that they seemingly brush it off as if it were just part of the job. These scenes are not normal nor should they be treated as such but for police officers it is *part of their normal*. One cannot expect to walk away unscathed from a

career where this is 'their normal.' As one retired officer explained, "it's not a question of IF you will be altered by the job, it's a matter of how."

One officer spoke about one of his very first calls which was a suicide which still haunts him. He and his partner were first to arrive on scene in the apartment where a man had shot himself in the head. When they arrived, it was a ghastly scene, one that you would see in a horror movie or perhaps a nightmare. The officer described the scene and explained that while in the room there were "brains dropping on the floor." He explained that even after leaving the scene, there was brain matter still on his boot. This officer is retiring shortly and after all his years of service and the calls that he has taken, that one in particular still affects him to this day.

Another nearly retired officer who spoke freely about some of his calls explained that he also has a case that he can't shake, even after years since the call. He explained that in this case he responded to a domestic disturbance between a woman and her common-law spouse. It was a gruesome attack where she was beaten so severely she almost died. Before police could arrest the man, he killed himself. When he and his partner arrived at the apartment, they saw the woman who was barely alive along with her two children. The woman was shot in the arm and in the face. The officer said that the victim kept begging the officers to "put my arm back on" as it was only hanging by a tendon. The woman's skull was fractured as the bullet went through her arm (which was raised to cover her face) and into her face which had been "scalped" (when the skin separates from the bone and tissue at the hairline which appears to peel back the skin entirely). This officer explained that there are times when he closes his eyes and it is like he is still there. He needed therapy to deal with this incident as it was so horrific and it was extremely upsetting to him that children were present.



One retired officer spoke about having to hide behind a car as he was being shot at. He explained that despite what it looks like on television, it is far more real when it is happening around you. He explained that he would smell the gun powder which still haunts him today even years after being retired. Thankfully, neither he nor his partner were injured, but he was quick to admit that he was lucky and that it could have been a very different outcome in a matter of seconds and millimetres. He explained that before he entered the service he was “very, very shy” and that once you become an officer, you don’t have a choice and you “have to grow up, you have no choice in the matter.” He explained that being shot at and responding to suicides are part of that. He had also responded to a call involving a young girl that he cannot shake. “Her face had been torn off and put back on, and to this day I can’t NOT remember that girl’s face.”

### **“Everybody Knows You’re a Cop”**

While policing itself is a difficult and dangerous job (which is stressful enough), many officers explained that the nature of the job also dictates the fact that you cannot just turn it off. If officers witness a crime in progress, even on a day off, they are mandated to assist and while with no weapon or armour, they are risking their safety for the greater good of their community. If you are a cop or even to some extent their spouse, you are on at all times. You are a target and there is a reason that officers often hang out with officers- it is safe. There is no risk of having to be ridiculed, judged, insulted, or asked for unsolicited advice from the public. Many of the officers interviewed spoke about how the job affects them especially when they are *not on the job*. While this was a significant stressor for officers, it was also mentioned by the spouses as well.

The job of policing is never done. As one retired officer explained during his career he put in a number of hours helping friends and family, answering their questions and helping them

navigate through the justice system. He said that while he worked plenty of “on the clock hours,” he “never put any value on time off the clock.” He told a story about a relative of his that became involved with police after he committed an armed robbery of a gas station. While the officer had sworn to uphold the law without question, he felt a great deal of commitment to his wife’s family who was struggling with the arrest of a young member. The officer agreed to help and look into the matter; however, the young man was guilty no matter which side of the law you were on. Evidence consisted of video and eye witness accounts, and the man was apprehended with the stolen merchandise and the weapon. The officer couldn’t win; the family was furious with him that he could not get the charges dropped or lessened. The officer and his wife explained that this was a very difficult time for them as family held them responsible rather than the accused. The family also did not seem bothered by the fact that this officer looking into certain things regarding the case could potentially put him and his job at risk.

One officer spoke about being called by family and friends to go out and arrest someone for breaking the law, despite the officer being at home, in a different area of service, and not having any knowledge of the crime. He explained that this has happened many times and no matter how well he explains it, the calls keep coming. This also happened while he was in his condo and a less than reputable young man moved in. Everyone in the condo complex phoned and visited him demanding that he kick this young man out. This young man was in fact quite dangerous but there was little the officer could do without catching him in the act, which he tried to do; however, it was not enough to satisfy the condo residents who became increasingly aggressive towards the officer. In the end the young man moved out on his own, but not after the officer was harassed by the other condo owners.

One civilian spouse spoke about having to defend police tactics herself. She explained that because she is married to a police officer, family and friends expect her to know all of the laws and dispense legal advice. She stated that no matter how many times she explained she was not an officer, it did little to no good: “just being a policeman’s wife, they think you’re going to uphold the law.” This was common with most of the couples who explained that they all had at least one family, friend, neighbour, or coworkers that complained about police tactics or demanded to know why they were fined, ticketed, or arrested for a particular offense. For one couple where both husband and wife are active duty officers, they explained that they frequently are defending the decisions of every police officer, even if they operate in a different area of the country.

#### **“We Couldn’t Even Go To A Football Game”**

As mentioned previously, an officer’s job is never done. Even while they are off the clock, they are never off duty. Many of the officers and their spouses explained that at one time or another, they feared for their safety due to someone knowing they were a police officer, or married to one. It is also recognized that an officer’s job is exceedingly dangerous, but what happens when their job is done- is the threat over as well? Unfortunately not as many officers accounted in their interviews.

One nearly retired officer spoke about his time working in an undercover unit. He and his wife explained that after many threats on their lives and the lives of their children, they needed to move outside of the city. The gang and drug dealers that he dealt with at work had found out where he lived, where he and his family shopped, and where his children went to school. They had installed cameras for their property and because of the known threats he had to carry his gun on him for two years. For him and his wife, that was the last straw before moving as far away as

they could. They explained that as their children got older they were very selective of the friends their children hung out with, as well as their parents. Officers spoke about their need to be guarded as there are a number of people that would cause harm to any officer, whether they know them or not. Often gangs have their own surveillance teams that are watching the moves of officers, including following them from work to home.

Another retired officer spoke about not having certain work crews down at their house because they appeared “sketchy”; however, in the end as it turned out, the crew that ended up completing their work was a man that the officer previously dealt with in a homicide years ago. Thankfully the young man had turned his life around, but it could have been a different story. Officers don’t freely tell people what they do for work and dealing with every stranger can be a dangerous situation. One officer spoke about the dangers even with buying a car as it is not uncommon for gang members to work part time selling cars or detailing or servicing them. An officer (or his spouse) can never be too careful.

### **“You Get Worried About His Health”**

While officers are on patrol they need to be ‘on’ at all times. Whether they are driving around responding to priority calls, conducting investigations, or interviewing suspects or victims or witnesses there is little, if any down time. This means that simple things that most employees take for granted, like washroom breaks are not as readily available for on duty officers. The stress of the job can also pose a significant for the officer in terms of their health. A number of the more senior officers spoke about how the job affected their health in a variety of ways.

One soon-to-be retired officer spoke about being medicated due to high blood pressure. According to his doctor, the elevated rates were a direct effect from his job as a police officer, something that his doctor says he sees often among his police officer patients. The officer continued to mention that as soon as he made the plan to retire, he noticed that his blood pressure was more manageable and needed less medication to control it. In addition to his elevated blood pressure rates the officer also spoke about the impact of sleep deprivation and how that has played a negative role in his health as well. He discussed this concern with his doctor years ago and they both decided that medication was not in the officer's best interest; however, as a Sergeant he knows that many of his officers are in fact on sleeping pills, often on a long term basis. The officer credits working out and a healthy diet in his coping repertoire; however, he also was quick to mention that there are few older officers that take care of themselves the way he does. The officer and his wife spoke about a number of colleagues that have had a number of stress related injuries that for some resulted in surgeries and having to resign. This officer along with the other two retired officers spoke at length about the inability to use the washroom for a bowel movement in particular which caused them to be constipated all tour, which can be as many as seven days. "I couldn't even go to the bathroom; I wouldn't have a bowel movement for a week."

One of the retired officers who was interviewed spoke about how his health has dramatically improved since he has been retired. "Now that I'm out of it and I look back, I go, wow, you know there was a lot of illnesses I had at the time. Back pain, sinus infections... You know I just don't get them in retirement." The officer admitted that while he was on duty he had no idea that the illnesses were caused from his work; however, after speaking with his doctor

both men made the connection that it was a direct causation from policing. “Clearly there were a lot of physiological impacts of the job that I wasn’t aware of.”

When speaking to another couple about the physiological/ health concerns of the job, the officer’s wife stated that she looks forward to him retiring so he can eliminate the stress because as a nurse herself, she sees the toll his job has taken on him over the years. “I’m looking forward to him being done, just in general- just for his health.” The officer spoke about a colleague and his father, both officers that internalized the stress of the job to the point where they both died suddenly of massive heart attacks. The men were ages 72 and 52 respectively. Accordingly to everyone involved including the medical team they were too young to die from such significant heart failure but the stress had in fact aged the heart beyond their years. Both officers presented as fit; however, they had significant hyper tension which was the cause of death. The officer recalls this being a wakeup call and began to take better care of himself to last long into his golden years. The officer and his wife also spoke at length about the eating and sleeping patterns of officers can be a detriment to their health as well. The officer explained that he is never able to get his sleep patterns regulated as by the time he gets close; he has to go back to work. He explained that the revolving shift (day, evening, night shift) is extremely difficult to manage for officers and it is a significant cause of tension, migraines, poor diet, and lack of exercise due to the abnormal sleep/ wake patterns.

The officer highlighted that while you are busy on shift, you often do not have time to eat a well-balanced meal. He explained that many times he grabs fast food in a drive-through because it is easy to eat while he and his partner are in between calls. Police officers do not have a designated meal break and often grab and go while they can. This of course means fast food at three in the morning because that is the only restaurant open. “A diet of fast food and stress can

lead to an officer dying well before their time.” This officer also spoke about the physical injuries sustained as a result of the demanding nature of the job. It is not uncommon for breaks, sprains, strains, muscle damage, or even more serious injuries to plague an officer over his/ her career. Officers can also wear up to 75 pounds of additional weight with inner and outer bulletproof vests, duty belts, and armour depending on their unit requirements. While wearing the additional gear, officers need to exert themselves physically while running, climbing, or standing for long periods of time. According to this officer, he is dealing with sciatic and hip pain from constantly getting in and out of the car with his gear on. He admits that this pain does not get better with age. “The pain is only getting worse with age, and the job doesn’t help.”

It is interesting to note that in regards to the physical/ physiological side of stress, it was only the older, more senior, and retired officers that recognized the physical implication of the job long term. This leads to me to believe that officers feel the strain of the job towards the end of their career when it is at times too late.

### **Social Life? What Social Life?**

Maintaining a social life while you are married, especially with children can be a struggle. There are only so many evenings and weekends in a month. For officers who are working on a General Patrol shift, they only have 2 weekends off a month. Those days are usually filled with time with close family like spouse and children. This can get complicated when you have friends and extended family who are vying for your time as well. But policing does not just affect the time you *have* to be social, it also affects your ability to *be* social. Trying to spend time with non-police friends can be difficult when one or even both friends work shift work schedule but officers also found that they lost friends when they became police officers and in one case, even family members began to distance themselves from the officers.

One civilian spouse and a mother of three explained that she finds the lack of couple time very frustrating due to the officer's hours. "When he has only 2 weekends off a month, well family wants to see him or we have this birthday party or this to do. And that's kinda frustrating because we don't have our own time." She also spoke about her family and friends distancing themselves from her and her feeling like her husband's job had dramatically slashed her friends' list. The spouse and her husband spoke about not being invited to family dinners or functions at their church because it is just assumed that the spouse is working. The spouse explained that even if he is working she would love to attend. The couple expressed that this area in particular is a huge stressor for them, especially for the spouse as she stays at home with the children and feels she is in desperate need of adult social interaction. She explained that some of their friends seemed to "resent" them and the officer's schedule; she felt that she spent more time defending his schedule than anything: "okay well we're booked for this month, maybe the next month and they're just like that's ridiculous, like what are you, 'Ms. Popularity' and it's like no, you don't get it." As she explained with only two weekends off a month it is difficult to schedule social outings.

She also expressed frustration in a failed expectation that she would meet other police wives that she could connect with. "I thought there would be like more like I thought the wives would do more together. Like I thought it would be like a beer hockey league where the guys play hockey but the wives watch and socialize, you know?" In her particular case, the social restrictions and her feeling trapped at home with three children has a significant impact on their relationship. When speaking, she stated that she is resentful of his job and feels isolated. "Going to functions alone and yeah people feeling sorry for me not bad enough to help me, just bad enough to say, 'awww.' "



Another nearly retired officer explained that working shift work was an excuse to not have to go out after work. He explained that he and his wife enjoy being home together and have used the excuse that he had to work as a way to get out of feeling obligated to make plans. He explained that he and his wife have spent many Christmas holidays alone, just the two of them, which was exactly what they wanted. He did also explain that there are times when you just don't want to go out. "Working six evenings plus overtime I don't feel like going out on a Saturday night." This officer also explained that while having a social life is nice it can also be dangerous. He and his wife have avoided certain social gatherings because of his job. Often at parties when making small talk, the question of employment comes up as a typical ice breaker. For this officer, due to safety concerns he avoids telling strangers what he does for work. In his opinion, the best way to avoid the questions is to not go out at all.

One retired officer explained that he and his wife were excluded from family gatherings "because I was a policeman they didn't want me there." Both he and his wife found this extremely unsettling as their own family was not interested in having them over because they felt that having a police officer in the crowd would change things. People would worry about having too much to drink and then driving or if someone was going to smoke marijuana they did not want the officer or his spouse there. This was echoed by a young active duty officer who also explained that he and his family have been excluded from family functions because of his job. This is one aspect of social consequences as a result of the job; however, in an indirect way. While every family is different and handles family dinners in their own specific ways, this family found that being excluded from dinners was very upsetting.

### **On Your Own**

Working shift work can take a toll on any relationship. It can be nurses, doctors, paramedics, plumbers, or electricians. The simple fact that someone is not home for an extended period of time when the other spouse is, it is difficult. Most people that enter a relationship do so to be *together*. The basic principle of shift work denies that possibility. The officers interviewed for this project work a revolving schedule. They work a tour of days, days off, tour of evenings, days off, a tour of nights, and then another set of days off before flipping to days again. While the schedule is consistent, it is difficult to adapt to for both the officer and their spouse, even without the added complication of overtime.

As discussed previously, for one couple in particular, a young couple with three small children and the officer has only two full years on the job, stated that there is resentment and frustration in the relationship because of the job; in particular, the hours. This has had a dramatic negative impact on their relationship. The wife used words in her responses such as “resent” and “alone” when talking about how she felt about her husband’s job. “I’m mad at him, like I’m just mad at him.” A similar sentiment was expressed by another officer’s wife who explained that while she is okay with being alone, it still happens more than she would like. “I find I’m on my own a lot.” One of the other young civilian spouses interviewed expressed her feelings of isolation in the following comment: “I’m a married single woman or a married single woman with kids. Like I joke about it. He doesn’t think it’s very funny but it’s just a joke.” A more senior civilian spouse also felt that her husband’s hours left her feeling alone at times. “I find that the week that he does his evening shifts, then works overtime and then leaves for work early, I find that very lonely. Even with the dog I find it lonely.”

### **A Family Affair**

For some young men and women, they have grown up watching their mothers and/ or fathers leave home in a uniform, show up unannounced at a soccer game, or surprise them at a park flashing their lights and sirens. Those same children, however, have also grown up with parents missing birthdays, Christmas dinners, and school concerts. For some, following in their parents' footsteps is an honour, a rite of passage; yet for others, it is their parent's worst nightmare that their son or daughter will go on to policing as they did.

As one couple explained in their interview, "that's why personally I don't want my sons to go into policing because I know what can happen, I know the dangers out there, I know there are dirty cops out there and I know there are stupid people running the place and I know there's great people too but I know we're dealing with the worst 3% out there in society and do I want them to have that every day." They explained how thrilled they were when their son had a taste of policing and did not like it. "Thankfully it didn't pan out. One had a taste of it, and realized it wasn't for him. We were just so happy." In their eyes, they did not want their children to be exposed to the stress that they were. This was a very different perspective from one officer who relied heavily on his father, a retired police officer for guidance.

"I call my dad. Like he's been through all of that. He's been in homicide a couple times like he's been sort of everywhere. So he's a good one for that and then the nice thing with him is that he also recognizes good work which it our shift doesn't tend to so every now and then when you do something you're actually proud of and you guys talk it over, you and your partner go like man, you know what, that was really a good job. That was solid, solid work. Like nobody gives a shit and you tell some old f-cker like him who's been retired for 20 years and he goes, that was f-cking good work. Yeah it was good work. I mean his opinion matters more than any of the goofballs out there."

In addition to the pressure of wanting to perhaps become an officer, there is the opinion of your spouse that plays a role as one spouse explained during her interview. “I never wanted you to be a cop. I never hid that I never wanted you to be a cop at all.” According to that spouse however, she was not interested in preventing her husband from following his dreams. “I don’t want to wake up twenty years from now and me say to him, I never wanted you to be a cop, if I didn’t say that this moment- I think I would regret it later.”

Another officer said that when his civilian wife decided to join the Service, he was also not overly excited about the idea: “he didn’t want me on the job.” She spoke about having her husband follow her on certain dangerous calls wanting to protect her which backfired and actually undermined her abilities.

Another second generation police officer spoke about the difficulties being a second generation police officer and the pressures that are associated with living in a house where there were certain career expectations. “There were very high expectations for him to move up the chain” but the officer was happier working and not being in a supervisory role. Both he and his wife expressed that this was an area of high stress which impacted both the officer and their relationship. The officer found it hard to disappoint his family but enjoyed working in the capacity that he was. This was a significant and long lasting career struggle he dealt with during his time as an officer.

### **“I Was Always Tired”**

The officers interviewed for this study worked a variety of shifts depending on their area of specialization. General patrol officers work a rotating shift of days, evenings, and nights while some of the detective/ back office officers work Monday to Friday during the days. Regardless of

the shift that officers are currently working, they all spoke at length about the difficulty with shift work. Some officers spoke about specifically choosing units that did not work the rotating shift because it was so demanding and so difficult to manage. Another officer spoke about working a very short tour of the rotating shift and then remaining in detective work for the rest of his career, again to avoid the shift struggle. According to one of the retired officers, he was told specifically by his doctor that working shift work long term has serious physiological concerns. “That 12 hour night thing is just nuts you’ll be dying young.” The officer and his wife recall how shocked they were when they were told this. At that point shift work was something that the officer could not avoid. Another now retired officer recalled having difficulty sleeping during the day regardless of having a room in the basement with black out blinds ensuring the room was dark. “The hard part for me was sleeping only four or five hours and then I was up the rest of the day. By noon I’d be up and then I didn’t go to bed until the next morning.”

One couple did speak about the potential benefit of shift work in terms of child care. The young civilian wife explained that while it wreaks havoc on a relationship, it can be beneficial for ensuring that there is always someone to watch the child in order to avoid paying for costly day care or babysitting services. This sentiment was echoed by another young couple who explained that shift work for them worked well in not needing day care and only having to hire a nanny part time to fill in the gaps. However, this also made it difficult for the officer to see the children as when he worked nights as he would need to sleep during the day. “There was a whole week I wouldn’t see the kids.” Both the officer and his wife expressed that not seeing each other or the children for an entire week was a significant stressor for them, as well as the children.

One officer said it best: “shift work was horrible for me.” He spoke about not being able to sleep, always being tired, and also being irritable due to the lack of sleep. The officer suffered

from migraines and insomnia. He admitted that he had gotten used to sleeping for a few hours and then working his ten hour shift and even overtime without being tired. He did say that for three of four days after his shift he was still exhausted and could never feel like he was rested. He joked that the only time he has felt well rested was in retirement. He said that regardless of the shift he was working, regardless of the unit, if he was working shift work, he was not at his best. His wife agreed, saying that he never slept and when he could finally get some sleep it was right back to work. The effects of lack of sleep are not only dangerous while working but they are also long lasting. Officers expressed that they could never feel caught up with their sleep patterns.

### **Stress Management Strategies**

Initially when the question regarding stress and coping was posed to officers and their spouses, most officers stated that while there were elements of the job that were stressful at times, the general consensus was that officers and their spouses had developed coping methods to minimize the stressful effects of the job. Each couple explained that regardless of what specific activities or behaviours they did to cope, making sure that they spent time having fun and not thinking about work was a coping mechanism itself. The two main coping themes were: 1) family-oriented strategies, such as communication between spouses, prioritizing family (which included distraction), and the civilian partner's ability to manage family responsibilities alone when needed; and 2) individual-oriented strategies, such as using humor, recognizing perks of the job, general love of the job, and finally, outlets such as therapy, fitness, hobbies, and prayer.

### **“Remember Who Your Real Family Is”**

This sentiment of prioritizing family was expressed in 8 of the 9 interviews by the officer. One retired officer with over 20 years of active duty service explained that at the end of the day, you need to “remember who your real family is” as the police family, while the bond is strong, can be fleeting. This was addressed in almost every interview where each of the 10 officers explained that this was key in the success of both their coping behaviour but more importantly to the success of their marriage. That same officer described a story of a fellow officer that “lost perspective” of his priorities. This officer partied hard while with the service and while he was doing that, his family began pulling away slowly. When the officer eventually retired, he had no family that wished to spend any time with him; unfortunately that officer attempted to take his own life. According to this couple, the importance of maintaining a clear boundary between work and family life and prioritizing family when possible far outweighed any of the other obligations that an officer has to tend to during his career.

According to one actively serving member, the love of the job never outweighs the love of his family. He explained that in order to make family a priority you must be able to separate yourself from the job, which he also stated that not everyone can. In his opinion he looked at policing as a job, not as an identity.

“Yeah well I mean I love it, I love my job I take a lot of pride in doing very well but it’s my job. It’s not me, it’s not my life- I don’t live to do it I’d find something else to do if I was told I couldn’t do this anymore but and some guys unfortunately can’t separate themselves from it. It’s like they feel that they’re wearing the uniform 24 hours a day.”

Being able to distinguish clearly between being personal and professional was a significant coping mechanism. He was able to leave the job at work and not take it home with him. He was able to focus on his wife, his two sons, his hobbies, and social commitments which

he believed mitigated the stress of policing. One Sergeant explained that in the beginning, officers are overcommitted to the job; they eat, sleep, and breathe policing especially in the first few years when officers are trying to establish themselves and navigate the promotional system. He believed that after a certain point, officers learned that they are just officers and they relax in their roles. This officer explained that unfortunately for some those years can make or break a marriage, but in his case he felt that he also viewed his job as just that, a job. “The first eight to ten years the job is always first. You’re always trying to get ahead. Right now, to be honest, the job is a job. And that’s what it is.”

This same officer with more than 25 years of experience explained that when officers are slaves to the job and it becomes their identity they lose track of what is important, such as their family. He explained that he has seen it all too often where officers will work their shift and then go fishing or golfing with their coworkers while on their days off. According to him, these officers need to make time for their families if they want their families to support them. “You listen to the guys that are saying they don’t want to be around their wife because they aren’t happy doing stuff. They aren’t happy doing stuff together.” His advice to any officer was to find balance.

“Shut the phones off. In this day and age with these things (points to cell phone) you know, with my blackberry you know what? You have to leave it alone; you have to shut that off. Like that balance has to be there. If you don’t have that work-life balance you’ll forget to forget about work.”

His wife, who is also an active duty officer echoed his words of advice and explained that there is more to life than policing and also spoke about the importance of work-life balance.



When she and her husband are at home, they do not want to talk about work; there are more captivating areas of conversation that they want to explore.

“We don’t want to have to talk about the work – I don’t really want to talk about work. You know, I get home and I’m done. I want to talk about our house, I wanna talk about our travels, I wanna talk about what we’re doing. You know, that work-life balance.”

She echoed her husband that there has to be a separation between the job and your life. Like the other officers, she did not feel that policing needed to be her identity, “It’s a career, and it’s a job. It’s not your life.” She explained that she has seen officers run into difficulty because they cannot “give up the badge”.

This idea of work-life balance was also shared by retired officers looking back on their almost 30 years of service. When they were asked how they made it work, the first tip they provided was to not “live the job.” It was clear that these officers were able to separate themselves from their jobs and continue to be husbands, fathers, golfers, etc. They refused to let the job define them; instead they chose to be defined as family men. As one retired officer’s wife said, “His priority was his family. He always came home.”

### **“Communication Is Huge; It’s The Entire Relationship”**

It is safe to say that communication is important in any relationship regardless of profession; however, a number of the couples interviewed spoke about communication being a significant factor in stress reduction. For some it was the communication of rules and responsibilities, checking in after shift, or just using post it notes to communicate affection while on shift.

Communication was discussed at great length with the police couple where both spouses were active serving members of a police service. They used communication in a variety of ways including making rules. They explained that they discussed working in certain units and because of the risks associated, some of them were “no-go zones.” For example, serving in units like undercover or vice units were not allowed because of the strain it can place on a couple. Knowing this, the couple decided that they were not willing to risk their relationship for the unit.

“We sat down and talked about what was a priority, was it the relationship or the police service? We needed to establish those boundaries.” In addition to not working with certain units, they also discussed the issue of voluntary overtime or special duty; this was also one of their “no-go zones” as family time was more important. Another rule that the couple formulated was in regards to working shift work. They agreed to not plan any social outing on day shifts and not to discuss anything important on night shifts. For them, this was a relationship saver and they encouraged other officers to adhere to their rules. They explained that while day shift tends to be more relaxed as opposed to a night shift, it is still difficult to want to be social and if there is overtime, the plans will need to be cancelled which can be stressful. As for the leaving important conversations until after night shift, they explained that after working a ten plus hour shift through the night, having an important conversation is difficult because the priority at that time is sleep and nothing more. They believe that anything that important will need to wait to avoid any argument and frustration with their spouse.

For some couples, the issue of communication, in their opinions, had little to do with policing and more to do with a successful marriage in general. One active duty couple spoke about how their parents have an influence on their view of marriage. “My parents never hid the fact that marriage is hard.” While the couple explained that good communication is an essential

part of a police marriage, for them it would be important regardless of their line(s) of work. As they explained in their interview, policing is just one aspect of their life together, their marriage and their children are far more important and it is because of that reason that they rely heavily on their ability to communicate. "Policing is just part of it." If the officer is going to be late due to overtime for example, he communicates with his wife so that she knows that he will be late. This also is important if alternate plans regarding the children need to be made. Also if the children are sick or even if they are going to their grandparents, the wife communicates this with her husband, while he is at work so he is aware. "Communication is huge. Like it's the entire relationship."

One interesting aspect the couple brought up in their discussion of communication was the issue of over sharing. For some spouses, they want to hear all about the officer's day while the officer might not be interested in reliving the day all over again while in some cases, the officer may want to give his spouse the entire play by play of the day. The couple acknowledges that there is a fine line between too little or too much sharing and it is important to know that every day or situation is different.

"If I'm really stressed and it's really shi\*\*y and I need to talk about it, then I talk about it. And again the nice thing for me is that sometimes when you don't want to talk to her about it or don't want to bother her with it, or maybe just need someone that actually gets it, you know other than your partner who's gone through it and we basically debrief constantly in the car."

Another interesting factor related to communication was *how* officers communicate with their spouses. One nearly retired officer and his civilian wife spoke about a police colleague that speaks to his wife the same way he speaks to his officers and offenders that he deals with. The

officer explained that it is very easy for work to “spill over” into the family life, but officers in particular need to be extremely conscientious of how they communicate with their spouses. His wife admitted that there are times when her husband forgot this rule and she was quick to remind him. The officer explained that it is easy to separate work and home and some officers get caught up in work life and cannot escape it. As a Sergeant he admitted that he has seen and heard a number of his officers speak to or treat their spouses and even children as if they are suspects and at times almost interrogating them. He explains that while it is natural for officers to treat any situation like a ‘call’ or a ‘case,’ by doing this it can create mistrust in the relationship and the family’s unwillingness to communicate with their police spouse.

The methods of how officers and their spouses communicate during a shift are also worth noting. Retired officers explained that communication while on the job was extremely difficult and because of the difficulty, simply did not happen. If a message needed to be relayed, it was often done in person if the officer was in the area and of course only if they were not busy. The officers explained that as technology evolved, so did communication. Cellular phones made it easy for officers to get a hold of their spouses and of course vice versa. The retired officers explained that now with text messaging, working shift work is much easier as the officer and their spouse can remain in contact if necessary. Officers can sing their children to sleep without having to be at home. According to each of the officers and their spouses that were included in this study, the ability to stay in touch during their shift is invaluable for their relationship.

### **“You Make a Joke of It--You Just Have To”**

It is widely accepted that in certain professions, a dark sense of humour is useful for dealing with tragic or traumatic experiences. “Even at work to make everyone else feel better you start cracking jokes.” For example, sometimes nurses have to laugh and joke about the ugly

things they see and the colourful people they deal with. Policing is no different. A number of officers spoke about using humour as a coping mechanism both on and off the clock. For some it may seem offensive, but for the officers that do the work day in and day out, it is an important stress release.

One high ranking active duty Sergeant spoke at great length about all of the practical jokes that he plays on his staff on a regular basis. This of course led to officers retaliating which can lead to an all-out practical joke war. Plastic wrapping toilet seats, stink bombs, dumping flour on one another after shift, or showing up to calls and making faces that only the officers can see were all techniques that the Sergeant used to lighten the mood after a particularly difficult or long shift, or even just to get the officers on his shift to laugh. He explained that in his line of work there is very little to laugh about, so he would make it his mission to give the officers something to laugh at.

One now retired officer spoke about his use of black humour and how in his opinion it was the only way to process some of the experiences that officers are exposed to. He stated that when using humour he was careful not to do it in front of witnesses or victims but when in his home or with coworkers, they would “let loose.” He admitted that being professional was always key. He explained that not only is the humour a release of sorts but it is also the body’s natural defence mechanism kicking in as, according to him, officers see things that no one should see. He explained that even when he and his coworkers are at a suicide or homicide call and television crews catch them laughing, it is normal and not insensitive. “Like, you look at police scenes on TV and you see police smiling and it’s a stressful situation but that’s just your self defence mechanism working.”

Two of the other retired officers spoke specifically about not taking themselves or the job (when applicable) too seriously. One retired officer spoke about feeling very “high and mighty” early on in his career and then dealt with an individual that urinated all over himself and the officer. The officer while telling the story laughed and said that in that moment he was totally humbled and no longer felt like the tough guy that he thought he was. The other retired officer mentioned that he relied heavily on his dark humour, sarcasm, and ornery attitude to get through his policing career. He spoke about his well-known reputation within the service and the justice department as being too cynical to ever die. He takes pride in his attitude and explained that even older judges and senior lawyers were amazed by his curmudgeon disposition, as they themselves were self-proclaimed “old men” but this officer took that behaviour to another level.

One officer spoke about his time as a Sergeant at a suicide call, one of the more upsetting calls for an officer, he explained that one of his younger officers was very upset by the sights and smells and was beginning to lose it. In an attempt to protect the officer, the Sergeant stepped in and made a joke something to the effect of “well that’s nothing to lose your head over.” Now granted, it’s a bad joke and most people would be horrified by a comment like that; however, that young officer needed to laugh at that exact moment. That traumatic experience could have broken him and the Sergeant recognized that and stepped in with a joke to make him relax even momentarily. It was likely that the officer was looking after his team, and that the joke was perfectly reasonable in that context.

### **Every Job Has Perks, Even Policing**

Many couples identified perks of the job that helped minimize the level of stress and its impacts. Couples spoke about the financial benefit of the job including pension benefits, special

duty opportunities, the different units, the physicality of the job, the self-esteem and self-worth benefits, the longer stretch of days off, and camaraderie.

One retired officer spoke at great length about the opportunities he has been afforded while he served as a law enforcement officer. Because of the financial compensation that he received in terms of salary, court time, and overtime, he and his wife were able to live and support the family on one income allowing the wife to stay at home and raise the couple's children. The officer noted that without his favourable salary, he and his wife would not have been able to live in a nice home, travel, and provide for their children the way they were able to do. Both felt that having the wife stay home was a huge help to the family and that also could not have been possible if the officer was not compensated so well. The officer also spoke about the pension benefits that are among the best in the country. He and his wife admitted that knowing they could still live the way they were accustomed to on a pension salary helped make the job stress less intrusive. This couple also laughed saying that the overtime that the officer worked was not all bad either. When the husband would get the phone call or page requesting him to come in, the wife and children had their own system of coping by announcing "Okay Daddy got a call, we're going shopping!"

This same officer spoke about his illustrious career and how because of his job he was able to choose to participate in a number of units centered on detective work. Another retired officer also spoke about the opportunities he was afforded as a result of his police career. This officer worked primarily in the traffic division unit and was part of the motorcycle team. Part of the requirements was participating in motorcades of dignitaries traveling to his city. He was able to meet dignitaries from around the world including royalty, presidents and other high ranking world leaders, United Nations Representatives, athletes, and celebrities while on the job. He

recalled those experiences as some of the highlights of his career. He was also able to go to concerts and sporting events to work but was still able to catch most of the show before dealing with the typical rowdy attendees.

One of the most interesting perks was the idea that the job made the officer a better person. One officer described how he grew up in a chaotic environment plagued with violence, substance abuse, and illegal activities. He explained that it was likely that he would follow in his father's footsteps which would lead him to a life of crime. Instead, he decided to make an uncharacteristic move and apply to become a police officer. He was hired right away and credits the job for changing his life. The officer explained that the job gave him purpose and meaning. He also felt that his job was something that he could be proud of. "Being a cop meant something to me. It was important for me to have a strong moral code," something he admits he never had growing up. In this case, policing was a protective factor as he admits his life would have been filled with violence and addiction had he remained a civilian. His training as a police officer taught him about respect for himself and the law. He used his training to better himself. Despite the stress of the job, the officer always remembers that his life would have turned out very different had it not been for the Service.

Another interesting point about this officer is when he started with his service he was married and had been for a few years. She struggled with addictions and according to the officer she struggled as a wife and mother. As this officer grew up in an alcoholic environment he did not recognize that his wife needed help. As he went through his training and gained experience as an officer, he grew to understand and recognize the harmful effects of alcoholism. Also through his experience and training he was able to leave the marriage knowing that it was toxic. He wanted to protect his wife and child and did not think he could do that while married to



someone who was struggling with an addiction and was not interested in changing. The officer credits his service for empowering him to leave an unhealthy marriage. Had it not been for his training and education, he would have remained in a very negative environment. The officer's career helped him manage the stress of his relationship by educating and empowering him to leave and make a better, healthier decision.

Another perk mentioned by a number of the officers and spouses was the amount of time off. Since officers work ten hour days on a revolving schedule, they can have up to 5 days off at a time. According to a number of spouses, they actually felt that the officers are home more than they are at work, especially if their shifts are over night when the family is sleeping. One young wife and mother explained that regardless of her husband working shift work she felt that she did not feel the job took him away from the family. "I feel like you are home here more than anything." She also explained that because of the longer stretch of days off, when the husband books a week off it is actually three weeks off because of the time off before and after the shift. She explained that it is so easy to plan vacations or just time together when he has so much consecutive time off from work. Having her husband home both for her and her son directly decreases the stress she faces by being at home with her son alone. Her husband can help with feeding, changing, bed time routines, and is also home to spend time with his wife, which they both feel is a benefit to their child as well as their relationship. It also helps in regards to peace of mind. An officer is safer from harm when he is at home, out of his uniform, away from the job.

An additional aspect of policing which facilitated positive coping with stress was the shared camaraderie among service members. Officers spoke about the friendships that they have made and the long lasting contacts that they would not otherwise have if it were not for their work as officers. This was true for some of the spouses who felt that they had made a number of

close social connections with other police spouses. One officer explained that when you work with someone that you enjoy and you are in a car with them for ten hours a day, you learn to become very close, especially in stressful situations when you need to trust your partner with your life.

### **The Art of Distraction- Children**

Seven out of the nine couples that were interviewed had children. Each of these couples explained that they felt children were a protective factor against stress. Children have their own schedule and routines which need to be met regardless of a parent's schedule. The officers and their spouses explained that while shift work was evident in their relationship, it mattered little (if at all) to their children who expected a 'business as usual attitude' from their parents regardless of the shift and stress the officer was dealing with.

As one officer and father of two young boys described that he felt the job was actually less stressful than life at home with his children.

"The kids don't give you the time to do anything but, like that's what you do, you have no choice. You have to get you're a\*\* back in gear. Like how do you say no to a little guy that comes running into your room jumps on you after you've had 5 hours of sleep and says 'Daddy let's go to the park!' Okay, we're going to the park, guess what- and then I go to bed an hour after we eat."

He explains, children have no concept of shift work and at a young age, they do not care- nor should they. Both he and his wife explained that when the husband is home there is no time for downtime as the boys have been without him for a few days. The priority as they explained is

the children, before sleep and down time. This was also expressed by another young couple with children that spoke about the importance of adhering to rules and routines with children regardless of the officer's schedule. They indicated the child's routine was a priority and remained constant. While the spouse spoke about the difficulty at times of maintaining her child's schedule while the husband was working, she admitted she puts her son's needs before her husband as her husband can adapt more readily than her young child.

One retired officer explained that in order to "make up" for time away from his children, he coached all of their sports teams. He explained that while he could not be at every game, it was important for him to show his children that they were a priority no matter what. He also explained that if he was working in the area he would show up in uniform in a police car which his team, especially his children thought was pretty cool. He was quick to add that it also helped intimidate the other team which did not hurt. He explained that while his wife, also a stay at home mother spent a great deal of time with the children so coaching for him was a special bond between him and the children that he could share with just them. He recalls fondly that was one of the best decisions he made during his career.

### **"She Just Sucked It Up"**

For many spouses, a large part of the coping comes on their end. Spouses need to be independent and able to manage life, including children, on their own. While a coping mechanism for many officers was their resolve to make family a priority, the wives had their own ways of making the relationship work. The civilian spouse is responsible for the majority of the domestic work. While officers do have regular days off, most of those are spent coming down or gearing up for work, sleeping, or preparing for court or training courses. Civilian wives are certainly in charge of the inner workings of the home. Not all wives want (or can) be in

charge of this undertaking; some police wives are the heroes in the home while their husbands are the heroes of the street. Whether they work outside the home or stay at home with the children, their job is never done. Not only do they need to manage housing issues (minor repairs), the children, and running the family errands they also need to be able to manage being independent. Going to social functions alone, spending the holidays apart from their spouse, and eating dinner alone are all aspects of the job that the spouse needs to manage.

As one spouse put it quite bluntly but effectively,

“I am no bulls\*\*t. Part of that too I think is who you’re with because I’m a strong individual without you just like you’re a strong individual without me. So we choose to be together not because I have to be with him.”

This wife explained that she herself has certain rules and expectations of marriage which does not give her husband ‘carte blanche.’ When he is off, he is home and is an active part of the family. For one couple they explained that they have friends for whom this is not the case and the officer comes home when he wants, continues to stay out and drink with his coworkers, and picks up extra shifts when he can.

One wife spoke about enjoying her own company and how she did not feel like she needed her husband home because she was happy to be on her own. For some young couples that perhaps began dating in high school or shortly after, a police schedule can be very different. Having a spouse that is comfortable being alone is a significant protective factor. The ability to be self-sufficient is key, because depending on what shift the officer works, spouses are guaranteed to spend time alone, and being both aware and comfortable with that expectation made a significant difference. Officers and their spouses identified discussing and supporting

each other's individual activities as a great strategy for managing stress. One couple talked about each going to social outings alone because the other was working and that was just the way they did things. It wasn't a source of stress for the couple because that was part of their understood rules and the "roles (we) play" as mentioned by one civilian spouse who was a stay at home mother during her husband's policing career.

This officer spoke about how important it was to him to have his wife's support which to him was a huge help and "stress reducer." Another retired officer spoke about his wife cooking dinner for him and his work partner every night that they worked. "He used to come home all dressed up – him and his partner, no matter. And I used to say to him, no matter what time you guys come, dinner will be ready for you guys." This partner was proud of the strength and support she showed for her husband.

### **Off Off-duty**

Many of the couples spoke about the importance of having an outlet to help officers unwind and recharge while off duty. For some it was recreational activities, yard work, therapy, or religious activities. One couple where both husband and wife are active duty officers spoke about a number of their outlets that centre on fitness and travelling. According to this couple, they are extremely active and do many of their fitness activities together. For them, spending as much time outdoors as possible reduces stress. They both admit that as soon as their shift is done, the uniform is put away and they focus on staying active. "We have a lot of outlets I guess. We don't really sit around to get into that slump of the monotony of just going to work, or just being at home. You know, like I think, that's good too like on the next day off we plan to do something."

One of the retired officers and his wife spoke about the officer's love of tending to their property. He would spend hours pruning, planting, and maintaining their property which was reminiscent of a park. At times he would decline social obligations because he had so much yard work to do. In his own words, the time spent working on his property was "therapeutic." He explained that he felt it was necessary to have an outlet that you are passionate about outside of the job. For another officer it was working on his car, such as washing, detailing, and polishing it. Working on his car could take up to 8 hours. He described it as his alone time where he could turn his brain off and focus on something he loved other than the job.

One young officer and his wife spoke about cooking and spending time with friends and family as their main outlet. The couple identified that their love of throwing dinner parties and entertaining was a significant coping mechanism in their relationship. They also spoke about the importance of socializing with their non-police friends. This was a significant coping mechanism as it forced the couple to think about everything other than policing. The officer's wife explained that it is much easier to remove policing from your days off when you are not surrounded by "police talk." She also explained that in her opinion, a number of couples struggle when they are not able to distinguish days on from days off.

Some coping mechanisms were so common for some of the officers, they did not even recognize them as coping behaviours. While many officers spoke about fitness and physical activity as an outlet, one officer spoke about his hate of working out and how he does not consider himself physically active. It was not until his wife reminded him that for years while he was working he used his bicycle to travel to and from work, cycling a fair distance. She also reminded him that with the distance being so long, that is when the officer was able to think and unwind before coming home. At that point, he admitted that not only did that help make him feel

better it did give him some time to clear his head and deal with some of his stress before coming home. Two other retired officers mentioned that whenever they could they also would cycle to and from work. One officer even used his bicycle in the winter as the family only had one vehicle and his wife used it primarily because of the children. Working out and staying healthy was a way of life and far more important than simply going to the gym for a workout. With the physical nature of policing, officers also need to ensure that they are at their peak performance level, regardless of their age.

One active duty Sergeant and his wife spoke about seeking professional assistance as an outlet for dealing with the stress of his job. The couple spoke about being physically active, travelling, and spending time together at their cottage but for them, the most important outlet was counselling. They mentioned that initially they had gone through their work benefits program; however, the visits that were covered by insurance were not enough and because of that they decided to seek professional help at their discretion and not the discretion of their insurance coverage.

Another aspect of coping discussed by two couples, one retired and one active duty was the importance of their religiosity. Again, both couples spoke about the other outlets mentioned by other officers but for them, they placed high importance on belonging to their Church and the power of prayer. According to one retired officer's spouse, the importance of prayer was paramount in their relationship. "Whatever you do, pray together." Her and her husband discussed that every day, the couple prayed together. Regardless of the shift, she and her husband always made the time to pray together. They explained that not only was it something that strengthened their relationship with each other; it also strengthened their relationship with God

which was important to them. It did not matter if they were upset with one another; they still prayed together every day and still continue to do so.

### **“He Loves His Job”**

Regardless of the level of stress that the job created, every officer and their spouse spoke highly about their love for the job. Whether it was the nature of the calls, the excitement, making a difference, or being a better person because of their training and experience, it was unanimous that each officer was passionate about his/ her job. This was true even in the cases where the couples identified that the job created a significant level of stress in their relationship. One young officer’s wife explained that while she is lonely and at times resents her husband’s career, it gives her comfort to know that “he loves this job.” She admitted that because he loves his job it helps to minimize her negative feelings towards aspects of the job like shift work, overtime, and the dangerous situations officers respond to. She felt that because her husband was so happy she was more willing to support him. She was quick to mention that if he no longer enjoyed the job then he would be encouraged to find a new job. Another young officers’ wife also explained that seeing her husband so happy working as a police officer made the job and stress easier to manage and accept. While each of the retired officers spoke about missing their job and loving it, one explained that despite being retired for years now he fantasizes about the time spent as an officer. “I did it for 27 years and it was a good career. To this day I still dream about being a policeman.”

### **Conclusion**

A number of stressors specific to policing were identified in this section including overtime, shift work, and the dangers associated with policing. A number of the officers and their



spouses stated that at the end of the day, the job is a job and while it is stressful at times, they have found ways to manage the stress and make the job and the relationship work. For some officers, managing the stress was so natural that they did not immediately admit that they feel their job is stressful. For others coping strategies such as humour, hobbies, and physical activities are constantly in play. The officers in this study admitted that they do their job because they love it and they sleep when they can, despite knowing it is not enough; they miss family celebrations because of the job, but do their best to be there when they can and do not worry about the danger, as it will not solve the problem. The wives in this study held the majority of the responsibility for example with childcare/ rearing, family obligations, social requirements, and chores and did so because they support their husbands whole heartedly. They do what they need to do in order for their officers to be able to focus on the job and focus on coming home every day. And of course at times there are bad days, but these occur in any relationship. The communication that occurs between these officers and their spouses is integral and at the end of the day, the stress of the job is managed through their various coping mechanisms because of "his love for the job." A number of spouses stated that if the officer did not love his job as much as he did, the spouses would not compromise and shoulder the brunt of the responsibilities. Not everyone can make it as a cop; I believe the same can be said for cop wives.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

With the popularity of television shows like “Law and Order,” “NYPD Blue,” and numerous films depicting police officers as combative, alcoholic, suicidal, and in general poor physical and emotional health, it is intuitive to assume that police officers in ‘real life’ would be the same. After conducting nine interviews where one or both spouses are or were employed as police officers, their stories do not play out like a Hollywood movie. Is the job dangerous? Absolutely. Is shift work a social nightmare? Definitely. Are officers exposed to the ‘ugly’ side of their community? Most certainly. Is policing a thankless job with little to no public support? Undoubtedly. That is not to say that officers don’t struggle with addictions, violence, and divorce; however, there are plenty of officers who lead very successful and healthy lives.

The goal of this project was to explore the perspective of couples, both officers and their spouses, concerning sources of policing stress and stress management strategies, with an emphasis on implications for their relationship. The present study was the first in Canada that conducted face to face qualitative interviews where both the officer and their spouse were present. Therefore, including the perspective of the civilian spouse was invaluable and made a significant contribution to the literature. Spouses not only shouldered the majority of the family responsibilities, but also managed the officer’s stress when they were home. For some families, although the job is “just a job”, a number of coping strategies were identified that were able to help mitigate the stress that was present. While there were some spouses that were more accepting of the job, each spouse identified that because the officer was so happy with their work, they were happy to be in charge of running the home in their spouse’s absence. This was also an area that was discussed by a number of the officers. The male officers explained that

because of their wife's ability to manage the family, they were able to do their job and not feel guilty about working which helped minimize their stress from the guilt they felt about not being home. This concept of the spousal support has not been addressed in previous studies (Demerouti, 2004; Jackson & Maslach, 1982; Kop et. Al., 1999; Lott, 1995), but it was discussed at length by officers and their spouses. This was a significant element of their experience that has been missing in the literature up to this point.

Another contribution of the present study was the stress officers felt with regard to working with assigned policing partners and mandatory annual transfer policies in place. While previous literature discussed the concept of organizational stress, no other studies have looked closely at these specific aspects of policing. Every officer identified these areas as a significant stressor, particularly when it related to their safety or the safety of others. As safety is the primary concern for officers and their families, it is concerning that these issues have not been addressed in previous studies.

In terms of successful stress management strategies used by officers, many discussed in the present study were unique, and have not been identified in previous research. These included the impact of the distraction provided by children, and the perks of the job of policing. Due to the qualitative design of the study, the stress management strategies shared were far more specific and rich in detail. It is particularly noteworthy that the joy that the job brings has not been discussed in previous work. In the present study, a number of officers noted that the perks of the job such as salary, days off, and at times shift scheduling helped them to deal with stress. Both officers and their spouses spoke at great length about the stress being less significant because the officer was so happy at work.

Another significant contribution of the present study was that some officers felt the profession of policing was not only a source of pride, but also provided personal growth and positive life changing opportunities. These officers indicated policing gave their lives purpose and helped them leave behind horrible life situations that without policing they did not feel that they would have been able to do. The education, training, and experience gained on the job have never before been addressed as a protective factor for officers in the literature which should surely be further evaluated.

The present study also replicated several findings from previous research. For example, the use of humour as a coping strategy was identified in a Finnish study of police officers (Kerkkanen et al., 2004). While it was not discussed by every officer, it was identified by both officers and their spouses in a number of interviews where examples were provided such as pranks and the concept of using dark humour to separate the officer from the devastating sights, smells, and sounds of the job. Other areas of stress that have been previously identified in literature was the difficulty of working shift work (Bakker, 2004; Boss, 2002; Jackson & Maslach, 1982; Roberts & Levensen, 2001), the demanding physicality of the job (Kirschmann, 2007 & 2009; Stinchcomb, 2004) the physiological impacts of the job as officers age (Costa & Di Milia, 2008; Parsons, 2004; Wu, 2009) the stress of the nature of calls (Black Becker, 2009; Dantzker, 2005; Kerkkanen et al., 2004, Robinson et al., 2007), suicide (Burke, & Mikkelsen, 2007; Loo, 2003, Wright et al., 2006) alcohol and substance abuse (Dowling, 2006; Johnson et al., 2005; Kop et al., 1999; Lott, 1995), as well as the struggle with maintaining a social life (Demerouti et al., 2004; Folkman, & Moskowitz, 2004; Kurtz, 2008) while working as an officer.

Findings of the present study can be interpreted within the theoretical models of stress presented earlier. In relation to Selye's definition of stress, he included the concept of "Eustress" which for some officers is how they would describe policing. It is a positive and healthy stress, perhaps this was not agreed upon by all officers; however, when asked, many of the officers explained that in general they did not feel that their job impacted their life negatively. Of course, for some officers, they did feel that their profession did cause them significant distress. Boss's (2002) model of stress and coping is applicable to the present study as it incorporates both stress and coping mechanisms. In this model, stress can be a single event or can also present in the form of gradual change over time; both of these types of stress situations were discussed by officers and their spouses where they identified the source of stress either internal or external and the type of stress which could either be episodic like the nature of a call or predictable like the nature of shift work in some cases.

The officers and their spouses described the strategies they used to "adapt" (Boss, 2002) to the stresses of policing. In many cases, officers and their spouses did not indicate high levels of stress *because* of their successful coping strategies. For example, because of the use of humour, or the ability to work out and forget it, or simply not worrying about coming home late because the officer knows his wife has taken care of the home and the children.

Findings of the present study can also be interpreted within the Double ABC-X Model (Hill, 1949; McCubbin et al, 1983). Couples clearly identified that how they perceive stress (some officers initially indicated that certain areas of their job are not stressful to them) was key in the management of the taxing nature of their jobs. Both officers and spouses spoke at length about resources (family, financial, spouses etc) that helped them manage their perceptions of the stress. This model also highlighted the areas of both positive and negative coping mechanisms,

which were also expressed by both officers and their spouses, such as using exercise or alcohol consumption. Balance between stress and support was another key factor in the Double ABCX model which was also emphasized by both officers and their spouses throughout the interviews conducted.

The present study also highlighted the concept of the paradigm shift in policing. By interviewing retired officers, the present study provided a real flavour of what the job looked like thirty years ago and how it has changed over time. Based on their experiences and the experiences of the active duty officers, a clear paradigm shift in policing culture was evident. Changes in hiring practices recruit more experienced officers with previous careers, families, as well as academic experience. Changes in off duty social expectations were most striking; currently, officers are less concerned with drinking and partying as they have priorities focussed on their family and future. It is extremely important to note this shift, as it is not present in earlier studies; this paradigm shift would be a valid future study. Perhaps it was just these officers that felt that there was a shift; or perhaps police Services nationwide are adopting a more mature/ family focused mandate.

### **Canadian Context**

While many aspects of policing are common across services worldwide, there are also a number of differences between police services in Canada, The United States, and globally. As there was little Canadian data, this project set out to add to the literature base as a whole, but specifically to policing in Canada. The Canadian political landscape lends itself to a more liberal approach as opposed to our American neighbours that adopt a more conservative response to criminal justice. This difference has many implications for police stress including public perception.

In Canada, it is not uncommon to arrest, and re-arrest the same offenders multiple times during a shift due to Canadian legislation. Jail time that offenders serve once convicted is also less in Canada than in the United States for similar offences. A murder conviction in Canada can see a conviction of 25 years; however, with time served (unique to Canada), probation, and parole; a first time offender can be released in a quarter of that time. In the United States, a convicted murderer can serve up to fifty years (called a Natural Life Sentence), or even sentenced to Death. This difference in sentencing is often a significant political concern in Canada and typically the public looks to police for reform. While these policies are far beyond the control of officers, this public mistrust in the system translates to the public's mistrust of officers. Not only is there a difference between Canadian and American justice; these differences exist between provinces. Alberta and British Columbia, while close in proximity, could not be further on the political spectrum. This again can have an impact on officers struggling to maintain law and order while managing the impact on presiding thoughts and judgements of their public actions.

This study used municipal officers as did not include officers serving in provincial or federal police services. Again, while there are similarities there are also differences in the stress officers' face between the services even across the Canadian Provinces and Territories. Officers serving in this Service operate in partners. Many services across Canada and the United States operate alone. This brings a number of different challenges and opportunities for stress. Limited back up, rural isolation, and safety concerns are more apparent for lone officers. In this study, each officer spoke at length about the stress that partners bring; however, this is not a universal stressor. While not all areas of stressed discussed in the results section apply to officers

worldwide, any characteristics of the job such as shift work, over time, safety concerns, and public perception remain a constant.

### **Strengths & Limitations of the Present Study**

Using a narrative approach that included spousal input was a significant strength of the present study. The rich detail provided by couples provided more depth regarding previously identified stressors and coping strategies, but also helped to identify new areas of stress and means of coping. Spouses clearly played an integral role in either adding to or detracting from officer stress and were deeply involved in family-oriented mechanisms of coping. Their experiences including specific coping techniques were unique and have clear implications for further research and practice, discussed in more detail below. This aspect ties into the second area of significant strength in terms of this study, the opportunity to hear the spouses' perspective.

Including the voice of the spouse was an innovative feature of the present research. While policing can be considered merely a job, after the present findings indicated that policing is in fact a way of life and cannot be seen as "just a job." Overtime, political stress, mental health, or social constraints; these all have a significant impact on the relationship and the family as a whole. A number of officers featured in this study stated that without a doubt, they could not have managed had it not been for their spouse who managed the home, kids, finances etc. so that the officer was only responsible for working and coming home safe while on shift.

Another significant benefit of the current research project was the inclusion of both retired and active duty officers, as well as officers of differing ages, ranks, and experience. Information on retired officers is scarce in the literature. Combining the perspectives of both



retired and active duty officers helped to shed light on the paradigm shift in policing culture, including hiring, training, and coping patterns. The varying perspectives provided significant comparison by highlighting differences in how officers were trained and hired years ago. Being able to highlight stress in previous years and stress now, and shed some light on this paradigm shift gives way to a future picture of a more mature, stable, and responsible, police service. Initially, this study was only to include active duty officers, had that been the case, this project would have been severely lacking and the shift would not have been evident.

All of the officers included in this study were Caucasian and Canadian born, many were third or fourth generation Canadians. Many identified as Catholic, Atheist or United as their religious affiliation and all spoke English as their primary language. Many spoke French as well and some of the families identified as Métis. The demographic sample for this study reflects the general population of the police Service where the majority of officers are Canadian born, Caucasian English speaking males. Only one female officer was included in the study; that female officer was also married to another officer in the same police service. There was a slight majority in regards to active duty vs. retired officers. Of the retired officers, the years of service was very similar with an average of almost 30 years. Many of the couples were extremely religious and attended Church on a regular basis, while others chose to identify as non-religious or Atheist. For the most part, the sample was fairly homogeneous; however, future studies could look at more couples which would increase the diversity among such couples, including visible minorities, and more female officers.

The fact that the lead researcher was a civilian spouse of an active duty officer can be seen as both a strength and limitation of the present study. During interviews, officers and their spouses explained that they felt comfortable speaking with someone that has experienced the

same stress that they have. They also explained that they did not feel as though they were being judged or ostracized for their perspective on life, family, society, and policing in general. Because the lead researcher was married to a police officer, there was a personal first-hand understanding of what these women were experiencing. It was also possible that couples may have doubted that their information would be kept strictly confidential. Perhaps knowing the researcher was married to an officer made couples obligated to participate in an attempt to support a member of the policing family. As well, some officers may have feared being judged if they expressed negative perspectives or feelings.

Another aspect that could be included as both a strength and weakness was the fact that officers and spouses were interviewed together. Joint interviews may be considered a weakness if officers and their spouses weren't completely honest and perhaps wanted to hide information that seemed too negative in response. It can be considered a strength because it is unfiltered, and the researcher is privy to the initial first responses of the couple and also how the couple interacts which is key. Nonverbal communication is also an important part of this study. In this case the officers and their spouses volunteered to participate and were aware of the basic premise of the study so there were no surprises to them in regards to the questions that were being asked. The dialogue between the couple, however, helped to provide a more realistic conversation where I merely listened to the two of them speak. I had a far less intrusive role; I was more of a 'fly on the wall' while the couple had a conversation in the presence.

Having participants check their transcribed interviews also contributed to the strength of transferability in this study. Not only did they check to ensure their points were reached, but they were also able to make sure that the themes identified were valid. In future, it would be best to repeat the study with a more diverse sample to ensure confirmability.

Other limitations of the present study included the self-selected volunteer sample. Those who volunteered indicated that they were comfortable sharing their experiences and were happy to participate in the discussion of coping and how this project can help future officers and their families. Some may have chosen to participate because they had ‘an axe to grind’ and needed to complain about the organization. In order for couples to participate, they needed to be part of a married or common-law couple. Sources of stress and coping may be quite different for officers who are divorced or separated.

### **Directions for Future Research**

For future studies, it would be helpful to ensure that the limitations highlighted above are addressed and accounted for. Officers and spouses from a variety of services should be included municipal, provincial/state services, and federal law enforcement agencies. It would also be advantageous to include more couples and follow them over time using a longitudinal design. Including officers and spouses that have separated would also be an asset to future projects as identifying any effects of stress or coping techniques that were not successful may be important in further development of prevention and intervention. Also, including additional retired officers would help to further identify coping mechanisms from couples that have ‘survived’ the job.

In order to fill these gaps, it would be helpful to work closely with law enforcement agencies to ensure that the results learned can be used to facilitate better programs. As the field of research is still fairly lacking in regards to policing, studies should focus on continuing with a qualitative design and keeping spouses involved. It would also be helpful to speak with adult children as they would bring a very interesting perspective on how the family coped with the stress of law enforcement and how the family coped. Children bring an interesting perspective

that has yet to be studied. The results of this study could also be made available to correction officers, probation officers, paramedics, and other first responders similar to police officers.

### **Implications for Future Applications**

Prevention, education, and intervention are the three key future components that are focussed on this section. One civilian wife in particular was quite adamant that she expected her husband's service to care more about their family and how they are managing with the stress. She indicated that she felt as though more could be done. The present study emphasized that policing is a family occupation which affects everyone in the officer's immediate familial circle. From the current findings, it is clear that more needs to be done to ensure that officers' families obtain information and training for their future connection to police life. This sentiment was echoed by a civilian wife who indicated that if she needed assistance, she did not know where to go. Another wife agreed saying, "If somebody knew what we were talking about and could give us answers like that would help." It is evident that more needs to be done in the way of prevention and education for all police families.

Although officers receive training to prepare them for their profession, family members do not, and as a result, are not always fully prepared for what their future will look like. Sources of stress such as isolation, loneliness, and taking on the majority of family and home responsibilities falls on the shoulders of the spouse. Because of this, families need to be educated and equipped with the tools that will help them not only to support their spouse but also for their own survival. If families are armed with the education and the awareness of what their future will look like, it may help them with stress management. For example, there currently is a family training night for the family members of cadets training in the academy, but it is limited to a

video and short discussion. The stressors and coping mechanisms identified in the present study may help enrich these training experiences.

In addition to the family nights, ongoing supportive service would be helpful to families as well. When spouses experience difficulties, it would be helpful for them to have access to a mentor similar to a sponsor. For example, a spouse could have access to a quick phone call to have a question answered from another spouse. A mentoring program or support system for officers' spouses like a website, support sessions, or one to one contact would be helpful.

The present study was the first of its kind in Canada, as no other study has looked at coping strategies in a general context, and none have included spouses of officers which is an integral part of the coping process. While there are weaknesses, the benefits are significant and should be recognized. This study was able to highlight in more detail the struggles of officers, for example the issue of partners, which up until this point was not widely discussed or evaluated. This study also identified a number of coping strategies that can be adopted by Services as well as families to ensure officers and their families have the education and resources available to them. While some of the data that does exist reports a great number of negative consequences of policing such as suicide, violence in the home, substance abuse, and divorce, this study highlights an interesting paradigm shift, worthy of future research.

**Table 1.1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants**

	Age	Education	Relationship	Rank	Assignment	Years of service	Cultural Identity	Income
Officer 1 (m)	39	University	Married (1 <sup>st</sup> )	Constable	General Patrol		Atheist	\$300,000+
Civilian 1 (f)	35	Graduate Degree	Married (1 <sup>st</sup> )	-	-		Catholic	\$300,000+
Officer 2 (m)	45	University	Married (2 <sup>nd</sup> )	Staff Sergeant	Human Res.	24	Catholic	\$200,000+
Officer 2 (f)	53	Some University	Married (1 <sup>st</sup> )	Constable	Community Services	23	United	\$200,000+
Officer 3 (m)	35	University	Married (1 <sup>st</sup> )	Constable	Sex Crimes	12	Canadian	\$120,000+
Civilian 3 (f)	34	University	Married (1 <sup>st</sup> )	-	-		Canadian	\$120,000+
Officer 4 (m)	53	University	Married (1 <sup>st</sup> )	Patrol Sergeant	General Patrol	28	Catholic	\$160,000+
Civilian 4 (f)	53	University	Married (1 <sup>st</sup> )	-	-		Catholic	\$160,000+

Officer 5 (m)	32	University	Married (1 <sup>st</sup> )	Constable	General Patrol	3	Christian	\$50,000-70,000
Civilian 5 (f)	31	High School	Married (1 <sup>st</sup> )				Christian	\$50,000-70,000
Officer 6 (m)	54	Some University	Married (2 <sup>nd</sup> )	Sergeant	Retired	26	Agnostic	\$120,000+
Civilian 6 (f)	45	University	Married (1 <sup>st</sup> )				Christian	\$120,000+
Officer 7 (m)	51	University	Married (1 <sup>st</sup> )	Sergeant	Retired	29 ½	United	\$90,000-120,000
Civilian 7 (f)	47	University	Married (1 <sup>st</sup> )					\$90,000-120,000
Officer 8 (m)	60	University	Married (1 <sup>st</sup> )	Constable	Retired	27	Metis	\$50,000-70,000
Civilian 8 (f)	61	University	Married (1 <sup>st</sup> )				Catholic	\$50,000-70,000
Officer 9 (m)	58	University	Married (2 <sup>nd</sup> )	Constable	Retired	27	Protestant	\$50,000-70,000
Civilian 9 (f)	62	High School	Married (2 <sup>nd</sup> )				Protestant	\$50,000-70,000

Civilian Spouse	Employed	Profession	Children
1	Full Time	Orthodontist	2
3	Part Time	Financial Planner	1
4	Full Time	Health/ Medical Records	2
5	Stay at Home Mother/ Casual	Chiropractic Asst.	4
6	Full Time	Group Benefits Admin	2
7	Full Time	Nurse	0
8	Part Time	Business Owner	2
9	Casual	Receptionist	1



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## **Appendix A- Interview Protocol**

### **Interview Question**

“Can you please talk about how (Officer)’s job affects your relationship (if at all), and if so, how you each deal with the strain. This would include how you each individually cope and if there are any ways that you cope as a team.” Couples were asked to be as specific as possible and to use as much detail as possible. The question also asked about different aspects such as social, emotional, physical, and behavioural aspects.

Both positive and negative coping should be explained, as well, the couple should provide a number of specific ways they cope.

## **Ethics Submission**

### **Summary of the Project**

The purpose of this project is to better understand how the management of job related stress affects the relationship between law enforcement officers and their spouses. This will be done by conducting open ended interviews with both officers and their spouses. To achieve this goal, I will be using a Narrative approach to qualitative data collection. Little is known about law enforcement officers in Canada and even less is known about how stress impacts the relationship between officer and spouse. This research will help to bridge the gap in the current research by using qualitative data gathering and including both spouses in data collection. In addition, this project is a requirement of completion of my Masters of Science degree from the University of Manitoba.

### **Methodology**

The researcher will conduct interviews with heterosexual, municipal police officers and their spouses (both civilian and police officers themselves) either married, common law, cohabitating, or couples living apart will be included. Couples must be in a relationship for a minimum of two years to be considered for this project. The study will use the data from 4-6 couples, or until data saturation is reached. Officers and their spouses will be interviewed together at a mutually agreed upon location. There is no minimum year of experience necessary for officers to participate. All responses will be digitally recorded as well as notes will be taken by researcher. Once the data is collected it will be transcribed by researcher and sent to participants to check for accuracy. Worker will analyze the data utilizing a Narrative frame work approach. A final copy of the thesis will be sent to participants.

**Informed Consent**

Informed consent will be obtained in writing prior to the commencement of the interviews. Copies of the consent forms are included in the Appendix section following this document. Once participants have indicated their willingness to participate in the current study, the consent form (which identifies the nature of the study, the parameters of the study, the nature of their own participation and confidentially), will be sent to officers either via electronic or mailed copies, depending on convenience to participants. Prior to the study interviews, participants will be asked to keep one signed copy for their own records and to return one signed copy to the primary researcher at the University of Manitoba. This ensures the nature of the study and the participants' participation will be explained to them prior to the interview process. At the beginning of the study interview, the researcher will remind the participant of the parameters of the signed consent form prior to the commencement of the interview; qualifying once again the confidential and voluntary nature of the research study, as well as the right to refrain from answering any and or all questions. This study does not involve vulnerable or special populations, therefore; consent is not required from legal guardians. Participants can withdraw at any time and will not be included in the study without penalty either in writing or in a verbal request; however the deadline to do is September 01, 2013.

**Deception**

No essential information will be withheld from participants, nor will any misleading information about the research or its purposes will be provided. This research does not involve deception, nor does it include the necessity of waived informed consent.

**Feedback/Debriefing**

Study participants will be provided with the opportunity to member check their transcripts in order to add, delete, or change material, and to omit identifying remarks. Participants will be provided the opportunity to receive an electronic final copy of the report should they wish to contact the researcher directly; that information will be made available to them. This report will be presented to the Winnipeg Chief of Police as well as the Wellness Officer of the Winnipeg Police Service at the Behavioural Services Department. It is hoped that a new training program and enhancements to current training protocols will be revamped based on the findings of this study. Since no deception is involved in the current study, debriefing is not mandatory, nor is post-deception feedback. If officers are wishing to debrief, opportunities will be available to them and a number of counselling services (Police and Civilian Services) will be provided.

**Risks and Benefits**

Risks and benefits will be discussed at the start of the interview. It is anticipated that there are no risks involved in this study to subjects or a third party; however, in the event that participants may feel some anxiety in talking about previous stressful events and the consequences associated with those events, contact information for trained counsellors will be provided to all participants at the start of the interviews. In no way will individuals be identifiable and/or identified in the reporting and dissemination of study results.

**Anonymity and Confidentiality**

Respondents will not be identifiable by their original comments. Respondents will be assured through the use of the cover letter that all responses will remain confidential, and that all



identifiers will be removed from the analysis and dissemination of the results of the study. Officers will only be identified as working in an urban municipal police service in Canada. Participants will be encouraged to use their own personal email and/ or telephones (not work related mediums) in order to maintain confidentiality and the interviews will not be conducted at the officer's station for the same reason. In addition, participants will have the opportunity to conduct a member check of their transcripts to verify their responses are not identifying in any way and participants can also add, delete or change their responses at that time. No one individual will be identifiable or identified in the results. Should any comments suggest the identity of a respondent; the data will not be used in the results or discussion of the study. All data will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the office of the primary researcher at the University of Manitoba and will not be made available to anyone but a thesis advisor. Data will be shredded upon completion of the study including notes and email communication. Every effort will be made by researcher to ensure that any/ all identifiable markers will be removed to protect the identity of participants.

### **Compensation**

Participants will not be directly compensated for their participation in this project; however, for all couples who are interviewed, a draw will be made for a gift certificate for a restaurant in their area. Funding for the gift certificate will be provided personally by the researcher.

### **Dissemination**

A final copy of the research project will be available for participants at their request.



## Informed Consent Form

**Project:** An investigation of policing stress and officers' intimate relationships  
**Researcher:** Kayla Shuster, MSc Candidate, Department of Family Social Sciences  
**Supervisor:** Dr. Caroline C. Piotrowski, Associate Professor, Department of Family Social Sciences

**Approved by:** University of Manitoba Joint Faculty Research Ethics Board

**Complaints:** Human Ethics Secretariat, 474-7122 ([margaret\\_bowman@umanitoba.ca](mailto:margaret_bowman@umanitoba.ca))

**This document is a consent form, which is necessary when participating in any research project. You will receive a copy of this form for your records. This form is to provide you with information regarding the subject of research proposal and what your participation will involve should you wish to participate. Please do not hesitate to ask if you have questions or would like further clarification. Take the time to read this form carefully and to understand any accompanying information.**

My name is Kayla Shuster, and I am a graduate student working on my Master of Science thesis project. The main purpose of this research is to identify how the management of job-related stress affects the relationships of officers and their partners. I will be interviewing you and your partner together.

Our interview should take approximately 60-90 minutes, but can go longer if both partners have more to share. You will be asked broad, open ended questions about your experiences (e.g., Can you please talk about how the two of you together manage the stress of policing?).

By signing this document you are indicating that you are willing to participate in this study. Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. You are free to stop the interview at any time and you are welcome to excuse yourself from answering any questions. If you wish to withdraw at any time, you may do so in writing or in person. All relevant information will be kept confidential and locked in a safe place. Only my research supervisor and I will be able to see responses related to your name. The University of Manitoba may also look at the research records to see that the research is being done in a safe and ethical manner.

The information you provide will be combined with the information collected from other interviews. Once all of this information has been collected and analyzed, I will create a final report. After I transcribe your interview, I will send you a copy of the transcript, via email or mail, in order for you to verify its accuracy. A final copy of the research project will be sent if you are interested.



By signing this document, you are indicating that you have understood the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a participant. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and /or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation. If you have any questions please contact me at any time.

This research has been approved by the Joint Faculty Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Secretariat at 204-474-7122. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

I \_\_\_\_\_ (print name) understand what the study is about and what participation involves and the signature below means that I agree to participate.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of interviewer)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

In order to verify accuracy of both the transcripts of our interview and the themes which may emerge, I would like to send you copies of both over the next few months. Would you like to review these documents and provide feedback, if necessary?

YES

NO

I anticipate that the final report will be available at the end of August, 2013. Would you like a copy of the final report?

YES

NO

If yes for either question, please indicate how we can send the material to you:

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_



## **Proposed Contact Script**

### **Email/ Phone Contact**

Good (Morning/Afternoon/ Evening),

Thank you very much for contacting me in regards to my proposed research. I appreciate your interest. I would like to set up a time where you, your spouse, and I can get together and discuss the project. I am interested in looking at how officers and their spouses cope with work stress and as such will ask open ended questions about how the job affects your relationship and how you both manage such stress.

I'd like you to know that all personal information will remain confidential and will be shredded once the project is complete. I will do my best to ensure that any/ all identifying markers will be removed to ensure anonymity. Our conversations will be audio recorded and I will send the transcripts to you both before analyzing the content to ensure you agree with the information gathered. There will also be a brief demographic questionnaire that you will both need to fill out.

It is important to know that this study is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time without any explanation. I have consent forms that need to be completed prior to conducting my research, how can I get those to you to review?

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Kayla



### **Open Ended Interview Questions**

Thank you both for agreeing to participate in my research study. If you have any questions before we begin, please do not hesitate to ask. Everything you say is 100% confidential.

Can you please talk about how the two of you manage the stress of policing together? I would like you both to describe how (Officer's Name) job affects your relationship and how you each deal with the strain. This would include how you each individually cope, and if there are any ways that you cope as a team. Please be as specific as possible and also use as many detail as you can. I am interested in any aspect of your life (social, emotional, physical, and behavioural) that you feel is important.