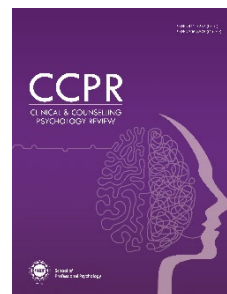
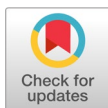


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Police Officers' Trauma: A Psychosocial Process and a Call for Support

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Abstract

The current study aimed to explore the traumatic experiences following life-threatening events among police officers. Participants' lived experiences were gathered in detail. The study was designed to explore the research questions, and responses were analyzed using a qualitative approach based on interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Six police officers were interviewed as a sample who had traumatic experiences, each with a minimum of three years of service. After a demographic form, an in-depth semi-structured interview protocol was used to obtain rich data. The six major themes were finalized in light of the sub-themes as follows: violent experiences, rapid response situations, public reactions and tensions, psychological and emotional well-being, as well as protective measures and job-related challenges. While, the sub-themes were produced based on codes. The results indicated that training and education for rehabilitation and mental well-being must be given as training courses to teach cops as to how to spot symptoms of trauma in both them and their peers. Future studies must focus on the interventions for trauma-informed care practices.

Keywords: occupational stressors, post-traumatic growth, trauma

Introduction

Around the world, trauma is a leading cause of morbidity and mortality, particularly in low- and middle-income Asian countries where violent crimes, falls, acid burns, and traffic accidents are common (Zevallos-Morales et al., 2025). Legal interventions and quick support from police in these cases are favorable. Sadly, systemic barriers including inadequate infrastructure, resource shortages, and a lack of strategic planning frequently obstruct the capacity to take appropriate actions and deliver high quality treatment. Hashemi and Mahmoudzadeh (2025) worked on treatment provision to victims who have faced trauma. Their study showed that over five million people die from the impact of trauma each year; the

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statistics have shown that this is one of the causes of mortality.

By 2030, it is predicted that the rising incidences of accidents and traumatic events may become more prominent globally, hence compromising the quality of service among police officers who are supposed to stay present in similar situations most of the time. Harm and injuries because of trauma are not only physical but severe psychological consequences are also seen after a few years of experiencing such events. The trauma-related deaths are also becoming more frequent in Asian countries compared to global statistics. The literature review has pointed out that the process to register trauma-affected people is present in the SMBB Institute of Trauma Registry. The quality of the trauma services in the organizations shall be encouraged in every national record to access correct global statistics (Memon et al., [2023](#)). In Pakistan, the already existing system of data across other countries must be followed to give access to people who are working in this area around the world (Ismail et al., [2025](#)). The severity of trauma-related symptoms may vary but the impact of the symptoms is widely recognized (Shamim, [2025](#)). Some individuals who have been affected are known to have better resilience and coping skills to deal with stressful situations. The initial response to trauma may be seen in the next few weeks, while the disorder develops in a few months.

The reported cases that have developed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after exposure to traumatic events are only 8%. The symptoms become worse between one month and six months after the exposure. If left unaddressed, the condition may worsen and lead to comorbidities (Vector Solutions, [2025](#)). This information suggests that trauma-affected people require prevention strategies. Furthermore, they must be trained as an at-risk population to deal with their growing symptoms as well as to recover from the effects of their experiences. The variety of symptoms based on psychopathology can be cognitive, emotional, and behavioral but their manifestation depends on cultural factors and experiences. Some people only present with the symptoms of grief, denial, and shock or shame, depicting disturbances (Godakanda, [2025](#); Sheridan & Carr, [2020](#)). Police officers are mostly prone to directly witness the intense assault and complex events during service provision to the general public (Goldberg & Gray, [2025](#)). Police officers usually work closely with the legal institutions and deal with cases involving violent offenders. Their job requires the capacity

to combat offensive cases, and seeking timely care and counselling is a demand from their organizations. However, it has been rarely encouraged due to the lack of awareness and cultural acceptability (Neubert et al., [2025](#)). Hence, this topic needs attention, especially among men, as men are probably suitable for certain professions in South Asia. The stereotypes and stigma of associating certain genders to certain professions are decreasing but still the acceptability might need decades to apply the change in the mindsets.

Rationale

Based on the existing literature, police officers have been identified as at-risk for developing lifelong trauma-related health conditions, as Civilotti et al. ([2021](#)) collected quantitative data on depressive and burnout symptoms. Detachment is also a consequence of traumatic experiences that demands immediate care. Detachment results following the juggling act of facing the stigma in help-seeking for support and an increase in the emotional overwhelming response based on the repeated acts of stressful events. The frequency to exposure to life-threatening events makes this population vulnerable to developing serious mental disorders, such as anxiety, PTSD, and other mental health issues that are chronic and relapsing (Paoline et al., [2025](#); Santre, [2024](#)). This study focuses on the experiences police officers in Pakistan, a developing country where the law enforcement system requires significant improvements and greater emphasis on the professional training of police officers. These officers may experience an excessive burden to fulfil the duties of their workplace along with the mental health challenges. This study is an effort to fill the gap that exists in literature in order to find out the trauma-related impact through the lived experiences of police officers.

Study Objective

The objective of this study was to explore the lived experiences of police officers who have been exposed to traumatic events.

Research Questions

The current study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- What are the lived experiences of police officers of their exposure to traumatic events?
- What are the coping strategies of police officers in response to their

exposure to traumatic events?

Methods

The current study followed interpretative phenomenological analysis. This qualitative approach was suitable for collecting in-depth data and expressions for analysis and discussion based on the research questions of this study. The exposure to traumatic events and the coping strategies were noted down as verbatim responses of the interviews. Through a structured method, the process of data collection was completed. Reflexivity was observed by the researcher while interviewing the sample of the study until the point of saturation was reached.

Sample Size and Sample Strategy

A non-probability purposive sampling technique was used for the required exploration of the experiences. The study sample was selected using the inclusion and exclusion criteria to choose specific literature that indicated demographics following an extensive review. This was done considering the sample who were at risk and in need of assistance regarding their mental health, as a service provider in the field of the police workforce. The sample selection was conducted to ensure the homogeneity of the sample.

Inclusion Criteria

- The study participants were males due to the nature of the job and cultural expectations.
- The age of the participants should be between 29 and 35 years.
- The participants must have at least three years of experience.
- Participants should have direct exposure to traumatic events.
- Participants must be currently employed as police officers.
- Participants should be available for one-on-one interviews during the designated data collection period.

Exclusion Criteria

- The study participants who have taken leave in the last year
- The age of the participants taking medicines
- The participants who have been diagnosed with a mental health

condition

- Individuals with pending legal or ethical concerns which may compromise the integrity of the study
- Individuals lacking the necessary/required communication skills to express their experiences during the interviews
- Individuals holding dual employment roles outside law enforcement.

Assessment Measures

In this study, self-reported measures were employed that aligned closely with the theoretical framework, offering the most effective operationalization of study variables. It is important to note that the measures selected for this study were not expected to encounter any issues related to cross-cultural validation.

Demographic Information (see Table 1) and Informed Consent

Detailed and In-depth Interview Protocols

Table 1

Demographic Information of the Participants (N=6)

Serial. No	Gender	Age	Post	Years of Experience	Psychological Illness	Ethical Concerns
1	Male	32	SHO	6	NO	N/A
2	Male	31	SHO	4	NO	N/A
3	Male	29	SHO	3	NO	N/A
4	Male	30	SHO	4	NO	N/A
5	Male	33	SHO	6	NO	N/A
6	Male	29	SHO	3	NO	N/A

The study's sample selection was completed through the inclusion and exclusion criteria as mentioned below:

Interview Protocols

Introduction

Participants were briefly informed of the purpose of the study: to understand the experiences and exposure to traumatic events among police officers. Additionally, confidentiality and voluntary nature of participation

were assured.

Interview

In the beginning, the researcher asked questions related to the backgrounds of the participants. Afterwards, open-ended questions were asked about their profession and the research topic. For instance, “Have you experienced any traumatic events during your time as a police officer?”, “Can you describe one of these events in detail?”. In the last, the interviews ended with closing remarks and gratitude. Additionally, consent was obtained from participants regarding their comfort with information that they shared.

End Interview

The study was qualitative and phenomenological in nature. The emphasis was on interpretative analysis rather than traditional statistical analysis. Phenomenological studies aim to explore and understand the lived experiences of individuals, derived from in-depth interviews. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a qualitative analysis method designed to explore and understand the personal lived experiences of individuals.

The participants responded, and their narratives were considered. Following the verbatim, the reading provided the frequently occurring ideas and their associations to each other. The linkages were formed after numerous attempts to read and understand the responses in the context of the participants. The interpretation was made through a strategy, and the steps from coding identification to sub-themes and master themes' development were completed. The process was guided by Clarke and Braun (2016).

Procedure

The qualitative study on lived experiences and exposure to traumatic events among police officers commenced with a meticulous procedure to ensure the integrity and depth of the research. First of all, permission was sought from the relevant institutions, and all the documents were prepared to collect the data. Then, potential participants were identified through various channels within the police department, considering factors, such as tenure, diversity of experiences, and willingness to participate. A pilot study was done before the departmental committee review, which was added in the sample. Informed consent was obtained from the participants, and their

demographic information was noted. Participants shared their responses, and then the researcher, with the help of a supervisor, did a series of comprehensive explanations using a qualitative approach. Interview questions were used to obtain rich data, and the data was protected during and after the study. Interviews were arranged following the schedule with the participants in a comfortable environment. Regular visits to the police officers were made. The preferences of the participants were taken into consideration. Open-ended questions tapped the explicit remarks, and the data articulated the accurate emotions, actions, and cognitive beliefs about the traumatic events. The participants were appreciated for their time and energy given to this study. They were encouraged to provide information as comfortably as possible, while probing was done where needed. The exposure to traumatic events was highly sensitive, and they were handled with care, along with counselling and psychoeducation when the interviews were completed. Moreover, they were followed-up to guide, and were also recommended reaching out to seek professional help when needed. Considering the subjective nature of transcripts, the data was transcribed with unbiased cycles of discussion to highlight the notes about recurring themes and ideas. Furthermore, the results were presented, and the master themes emerged after a lengthy coding process. The subthemes, however, guided the decisions to create results that apparently have an impact for the overall health outcomes of police officers.

Ethical Considerations

The ethics followed while conducting this study are mentioned below:

- Informed consent was obtained to demonstrate voluntary participation with a clear explanation of the study requirements from the participants.
- Confidentiality of the data was maintained, and privacy was observed for anonymity of the involved participants who agreed to provide data otherwise discarded.
- The information was stored for study purposes only.
- Following the data collection, information about the available mental health services, including the resources and centers nearby, was shared. The researcher arranged a supervisor to provide crises intervention skills training; she was certified as well as followed the ethical protocols based on an evidence-based approach. Additionally, accessible public facilities were shared for regular visits that were economical.

- During all steps of this research, transparency was maintained, and it was ensured that the experts validated the process where possible.
- Welfare of the participants and sharing concrete information was prioritized. All the participants were approached with empathy and respect.
- Permission from the relevant institutions was sought as needed.

Results

Six police officers took part in semi-structured interviews, offering a range of opinions, varying responsibilities, and years of service. They were able to relate their firsthand accounts of being exposed to terrible events while on-duty through these interviews by using this thorough analytical method.

Table 2

Summary of Subthemes and Major Themes Based on the Codes

Master Themes	Sub-themes
Violent Encounters	Criminal Incidents Armed Confrontations
Rapid Response Situations	Evidence and Investigation Medical and Immediate Support
Public Reactions and Tensions	Community Unrest Safety Concerns
Psychological and Emotional Well-being	Emotional Responses Long-term Effects
Protective Measures	Community Protection Risk Assessment
Job-Related Challenges	Work Demands Personal Sacrifices

Theme 1: Violent Encounters

The theme "violent encounters" effectively conveys the dangerous and dramatic circumstances that police officers frequently encounter while on duty. Officers routinely deal with serious criminal activities, such as violent robberies and murder cases, which require prompt and forceful response, according to interviewees. Both officers and citizens may be in danger if these circumstances turn into shootouts and crossfire occurrences. The

verbatim examples collected during the data collection for this study relevant to this theme are as follows:

P: “Three people who were my colleagues ended up losing their lives in the crossfire in front of me”.

P: “Seeing the robbery and the shootout was scary and overwhelming”.

P: “It took me a while to process what happened and cope with the emotions that followed”.

Theme 2: Rapid Response Situations

Since rapid response situations are scenarios in which a number of responses are deemed necessary within a short span of time, these pertain to events where the police officers are required to act at the earliest. Such events call for rigorous problem-solving, efficiency in decision-making, and harmonized coordination among the officers in containing the catastrophe. Examples of rapid response situations include medical emergencies, investigations that require certain fast action, and crime scenes that require specific samples or photographs to be taken fast. A lot of times, officers need to deal with injuries and even make sure everybody is safe and that there is no more violence.

P: “I carefully approached and told them to put down the gun, but they wouldn't listen. It was tense, but with backup, we managed to arrest the shooter without anyone else getting hurt”.

P: “I had to help make sure everyone got help fast. After it was over, I felt really shaken up”.

P: It seemed like things were getting out of hand, and I knew I had to step in. I tried to calm them down and stop them from hurting each other, but they were too angry to listen”.

Theme 3: Public Reactions and Tensions

This refers to the general theme of “public reactions and tensions”, which captures the focus on various angles of how societies engage and react to police in the aftermath of damages. Conversations with the public further pointed to the fact that there could be a variety of responses, including being angry, frustrated/fearing as well as distrusting the media. All in the promo talked about specific cases of hall shooting, riots, fake news, and tumultuous scenes following incidents. They dwelled on the

increasing levels of stress and security risks involved when dealing with such incidents, stressing issues of crowd control and policing the community.

P: "I had to handle a serious situation where a group of people were protesting loudly in front of a government office. They were angry about a recent decision".

Theme 4: Psychological and Emotional Well-being

The focus of "psychological and emotional well-being" is on law enforcement professionals' emotional fortitude and mental health in the face of terrible situations. Participants in the interviews talked about the significant effects of trauma exposure on their psychological health, including instances of stress, anxiety, and emotional distress. They emphasized the value of peer support groups, mental health resources, and coping strategies in helping workers manage the psychological effects of their jobs.

These events can have a big impact on my personal life. They can make me feel stressed and worried, especially when something serious happens. Sometimes I have to work long hours, which can make it hard to spend time with my family and friends.

P: "They leave me feeling upset, anxious, and sometimes fearful. It's hard to switch off from work when I'm at home, and I often find myself replaying the events in my mind".

P: "These challenges can also take a toll on my mental and emotional well-being, leading to increased stress and pressure".

P: "The job can be stressful and demanding, especially when dealing with emergencies or difficult situations".

Theme 5: Protective Measures

According to interviews, "protective measures" refer to tactics and procedures used by law enforcement officials to protect their communities and themselves after traumatic incidents. In order to guarantee safety and security, participants underlined the significance of proactive measures, such as thorough training in de-escalation tactics, situational awareness, and risk assessment. They talked about putting security measures in place to lessen possible threats and improve individual safety, such as body armor

and tactical gear.

It was tense, but luckily, with backup, we managed to arrest the shooter without anyone else getting hurt. It was a reminder of the risks we face as officers, but also of the importance of our job in keeping people safe.

P: “That scenario was in my eyes for many days, but as an SHO I have to deal with other difficult situations, so I had to distract myself. So, I engage myself in exercise and other work to manage my emotions”.

Theme 6: Job-related Challenges

"Job-related challenges" refer to the range of challenges and barriers that law enforcement officers encounter while performing their duties, as brought to light by interviewees. A variety of issues were covered by the participants, such as extreme stress and strain, extended workdays, and exposure to traumatic incidents.

P: “The demanding nature of the job also means I don't get enough rest, which disrupts my sleep pattern”.

P: “Irregular schedule makes it difficult to maintain a healthy eating routine, leading to dietary issues”.

Discussion

The results of this study provided useful points to discuss in the light of recent literature and supportive data. The legal professionals, including police officers, are indeed going through workload and pressure of emotionally overwhelming duty stations where violence and assaults are common. A thorough understanding of the responses was reviewed for attention towards the well-being and healthy life of the police officers. In a developing country like Pakistan, where resources are scarce and improvement is gradual, dealing with compromised areas of life, such as self-care is a huge step. The reaction to trauma is unique for everyone. Biologically and socially, each one of us is unique in expression. It is important to highlight that the present results of the study themes were examined, the objective of this study was fulfilled, and the presentation of the results was carefully planned (Ishtiaq et al., [2025](#)).

The first two themes, violent encounters and rapid change situations, have been verified by numerous studies where literature confirmed that

professional duties of police officers demand continuous witnessing of violence. Moreover, the excessive involvement of these professionals in similar events is an obstacle to their mental health management. However, the service providers were assessed for their mental health check during the training period; they were called for follow-up after six months or more. This is quite alarming for them to internalize psychological wounds and high stressful responses on-duty in similar situations. The rapid changes that they deal with is another theme to discuss that covers the need of emergency services, rescuing other human beings, and serving humanity at the price of self-care (Göylüsün et al., [2026](#); Lu et al., [2023](#)).

These demands negatively affect their emotions, and burnout becomes a habit without any personal time other than the obligations (Mohammed et al., [2026](#)). Research has indicated that law enforcement professionals may experience increased stress and psychological strain because of responding quickly to emergencies. Furthermore, the "public reactions and tensions" theme highlights how difficult it is to control public outcry and how the public responds to police enforcement efforts (Tizaa et al., [2025](#)).

The "community unrest" subtheme highlights the difficulties police officers encounter while handling heated circumstances where feelings are high and public confidence may be jeopardized. Prior research has shown how public scrutiny and unfavorable opinions affect officers' well-being and job satisfaction. This underscores the necessity of employing community engagement and effective communication techniques. The "psychological and emotional well-being" theme also emphasizes how critical it is to address the emotional toll that traumatic incidents have on officers' mental health. The "emotional responses" subtheme draws attention to the wide range of feelings that police officers may encounter during life-threatening situations, such as anxiety, depression, and melancholy. Studies have indicated that neglecting the psychological requirements of law enforcement professionals may result in chronic issues, such as PTSD and burnout (Ismail et al., [2025](#)).

In addition, the "protective measures" highlights the proactive steps that law enforcement organizations take to reduce dangers and guarantee the protection of their officers. The "risk assessment" subtheme emphasizes how crucial situational awareness and sound decision-making are to reducing any potential risks that officers may encounter. Prior research has emphasized how equipment, training, and organizational support can

improve officers' safety and well-being. Finally, the theme of "job-related challenges" sheds light on the various challenges that law enforcement personnel face while performing their jobs. The "work demands" subtheme highlights the difficulties officers face in juggling the demands of their jobs with their personal lives (Shamim, [2025](#)). Officers' well-being has been shown to be negatively impacted by job-related stress and burnout, which emphasizes the need for organizational support and intervention (Godakanda, [2025](#)).

Limitations and Recommendations

Officers' availability for interviews was further limited by hectic schedules and high-stress work conditions, which had an impact on the volume and caliber of data gathered. Further research would be helpful in focusing on developing interventions to deal with trauma, education facilities, and preventions from stressful situations. The suggestions and recommendations for future researchers are as follows:

- Policies about the enhancement of mental health must be formulated.
- Programs should be developed for police officers to attend who are dealing with regular traumatic events in their duties.
- Through an inclusive approach, the processing and catharsis of experiences should be promoted among the workforce as part of their staff meetings.
- Psychiatric evaluations must be a routine on-site for the police officers which might lead them to overcome the effects of trauma.
- Individual experiences must be regularly neutralized with work-life balance, guidance, and identification of the triggers and barriers that hinder them from relaxation.

Study Implications

- This study can direct clinicians and curriculums for the training and education of police officers. This could help them learn and apply psychological first-aid and self-care. Furthermore, it may also help them intervene in the worsening of the condition through attending more structured, tailor-made trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapies, eye movement desensitization, and reprocessing sessions.

- The information regarding the application of successful coping mechanism, effective training programs can be used to maximize the ability to deal with distressing moments.
- The study allows us to figure out how countless factors may contribute towards the habitual misconduct and unprofessional conduct among the affected population.
- The culture of silently keeping-up with mental health struggles and putting other people at risk through daily interactions is a challenge. The study results foster the initiative of positive community engagement for the police officers.
- By addressing officers' perspectives on police-community relationships, the study may contribute to initiatives fostering trust and positive interactions between law enforcement and communities.

Conclusion

This study explored the traumatic experiences faced by police officers. The findings provided insights into the psychological and social experiences they have faced or face following exposure to life-threatening events, such as shooting and fighting etc. The major themes concluded that violence and physical exhaustion, which are very common outcomes of the experiences, led them to compromise their own health. Moreover, they face people around them with courage and determination regardless of the impact they have taken regularly on duty. The aim of the study was successfully accomplished with implications for law enforcement agencies, policymakers, clinicians, and future researchers. The study also recommended planning further quantitative studies on relevant topics and problems in order to fill the gap based on the observed limitations.

Author Contribution

Sumbal Daraz: conceptualization, methodology, project administration, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, writing – original draft. **Nazish Idrees Chaudhary:** supervision, resources, validation, writing – review & editing.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data associated with this study will be provided by the corresponding author upon request.

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Generative AI Disclosure Statement

The authors did not use any type of generative artificial intelligence software for this research.

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