

**Understanding Morale in a Southern State's Law Enforcement Agency in Times of
Ongoing National Anti-Police Sentiments. A Qualitative Case Study**

Dissertation Manuscript

Submitted to National University

School of Business and Economics

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

by

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San Diego, California

March 2026

Abstract

The prevailing negative perceptions of the police have notably affected the morale of law enforcement officers. Beginning with the death of Michael Brown in the summer of 2014 and later the death of George Floyd in the spring of 2020, interactions between officers and people within their communities have significantly changed (Stirling, 2022). The problem of a nationwide decline in the morale of law enforcement officers (PERF, 2021) was framed using general strain theory (GST) and provided a distinctive explanation of morale. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how national ongoing anti-police sentiment shaped the morale of law enforcement officers in a southern state that did not experience issues of defunding and riots that many areas of the country experienced. This study engaged 34 participants in interviews about their perceived morale surrounding national ongoing anti-police sentiment. Thematic analysis identified three themes: Having a reliable support system helped officers sustain morale through emotional encouragement and shared coping strategies; officers perceived that national ongoing anti-police sentiment and public criticism lowered morale by creating feelings of frustration, diminished public support, and reduced professional pride, particularly as they faced scrutiny over excessive and lethal use of force amid calls for police reform and accountability; officers experience declining morale as they balance the emotional toll of daily duties with the added strain of public distrust and national ongoing anti-police sentiment while striving to uphold their oath to protect and serve. The research showed that public criticism and negative sentiment may diminish an officer's morale. To improve morale, officers need a leadership style that prioritizes open communication, positive reinforcement, and fosters a culture of support. Future research on declining morale should focus on a holistic approach that evaluates intervention strategies.

Dedication

First and foremost, this dedication goes out to my mentor Pete Burdon, a former Sergeant of the United States Marine Corps and a Vietnam Veteran who started me on my educational journey at NAS Cecil Field. Secondly, to my daughter Sasha Maria Hodge Lyon and son-in-law Spenser Lyon, both in law enforcement, who answered all my questions and assisted me in having a clear understanding of the criminal justice system, you guys truly rock! Third, to my son William Kirklund Hodge and daughter-in-law Valini Hodge for their undying love and continued support. To mi amante and kindred spirit Christopher Adam Michael Kasprzyk for his never-ending positive encouragement and support, thank you for being my anchor. To my mom Pearl Beulah Crichlow of Techier Village Point Fortin, Trinidad & Tobago West Indies. God bless her soul for always believing in me and supporting my dreams; no matter how grand they might have been, you are forever in my heart. To my brother Noel Joseph Holder who was taken from me by cancer, thank you for being my big brother and always looking out for me. To my adopted brother John Gore Fletcher who was taken from me recently, my heart is still in pain and so broken. I would like to thank you Fletchie for checking on me all my late nights of studies and making sure I was alright; you continued to be my greatest support, and your loyalty can never be questioned. I sure do miss you. To my sister Lena Smith for her continued support and prayers, thank you so much for always being my sounding board. To my spirit sister Leslie Ann Henderson who was taken from me recently; you stood by the sidelines and cheered me on all through my difficult steps. RIP Leslie. Gone but will never be forgotten. Finally, last but certainly not least, my dad Bodo Ernest Wufka, a holocaust escapee and survivor. Dad, I deeply appreciate your undying love, inspirational insights, and teachings. He always said that “time is one of the things that cannot be bought, so use it wisely and enjoy life to its fullest.” RIP dad.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank God for seeing me through all my trials and tribulations, without God as my rock, this would not have been possible. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Vicki Lindsay for her support during challenging times in my life and for helping me cope with the unforeseen deaths of family members and friends. I would like to give special thanks to both Dr. Gabriele Suboch and Dr. Vicki Lindsay for their never-ending positive energy, continued support, and willingness to always get me back on my path needed for success. I would like to thank Dr. Brian Allen for giving me guidance and Dr. Lonnie Stevans for his positive feedback and encouragement. To Dr. Darell Diedrich: Thank you for the extraordinary dedication you showed by spending so many Sundays and Mondays with me. Your time and effort reviewing my work and redirecting my thinking was truly transformative. I would also like to thank Dr. Meg Roberts; your feedback significantly improved the clarity and professionalism of my paper. For my first online studies ever completed and my limits due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I give my noteworthy thanks and appreciation to all NCU/NU staff members who played a part in helping and guiding me toward my doctorate degree. You all made my task so much easier and my time here at NCU/NU way surpassed my expectations.

Whole-heartedly and with deep appreciation, I would like to thank my participants, who were willing and courageous enough to share their stories, let their guard down, and expose a bit of their vulnerability. The impact of their participation has not only answered my research questions as an academic but has also paved the way for future research that will be critical in understanding the morale of law enforcement officers within their communities and leadership's role in and for morale support. The passion and desire for protecting and serving should be an honor and never a burden.

To my brothers and sisters in arms as law enforcement officers, who support the civilian sector of the law: I would genuinely like to thank you for your continued support and dedication to protecting the lives of so many within your communities. The sacrifices you make as law enforcement officers are unparalleled, and way surpassed the appreciation that should be given to you on a daily basis. I applaud you and pray for your continued fight for justice and the protection of the American people.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The job of a law enforcement officer has long been recognized as stressful, emotionally draining, and one of the most dangerous occupations (Frank et al., 2017). According to Gerety (2022), due to anti-police sentiments, protecting and serving have been difficult for law enforcement officers in recent history. Law enforcement officers in the United States currently face numerous oppositions in the line of duty due to extremely negative press, negative public attention, and anti-police sentiments (Pooley & Turns, 2022; Wyllie, 2022). These oppositions have caused critical concerns about morale, job security, departmental funding, career paths, recruitment, and retention (Arcuri, 2020). Due to anti-police sentiments, law enforcement has experienced increased violence resulting in victimization, heightened scrutiny, criticism, targeted attacks, and subsequent line-of-duty deaths (Deuchar et al., 2019).

The death of George Floyd in 2020 sparked national attention and criticism toward American law enforcement (Arcuri, 2020). George Floyd's high-profile case led to multiple riots and protests that spurred talks of defunding the police (Pooley & Turns, 2022) and created extreme danger for all police officers, eventually leading to 103 officers being attacked ambush-style in 2021 (Floyd, 2022). Furthermore, in 2021, 130 officers were shot, and 30 officers killed in the line of duty (Floyd, 2022). Law enforcement officers were targets of anger and hostility, and their safety was in constant danger of antipolice hatred due to news media and recognized brutality that hindered good law enforcement (Floyd, 2022).

Anti-police sentiments have also affected the retirements, resignations, and retention of law enforcement officers. Many experienced law enforcement officers nearing retirement decided to leave the workforce permanently, creating multiple additional vacancies within many police departments (Arcuri, 2020). In 2020, law enforcement officers in Hartford, Connecticut,

resigned at rates that climbed up to 86% of losses due to anti-police sentiment, anti-police climates, and in search of better pay and moral support (Lurye, 2020). According to MacFarquahar (2021), statistics indicated nationwide that law enforcement officers' retirement rates were up 45% and resignations by 18% within 12 months post-George Floyd's death due to increased anti-police sentiments. In New York City alone, 2600 officers retired in 2020 compared to 1509 that retired in 2019, and in Seattle, the resignation numbers increased from 34 in 2019 to 123 in 2020 (MacFarquahar, 2021). Additionally, in Seattle, the retirement numbers were up from 96 in 2020, compared to just 43 in 2019 (MacFarquahar, 2021).

In 2020, many experienced law enforcement officers took their learned skill sets to other agencies and different professions, creating possible gaps in onboarding recruits and fellow law enforcement officers who could have benefited from shadowing and mentoring while having field training (Tebbe et al., 2021). Early retirements and continued resignations of law enforcement officers could potentially create extreme shortages of officers (Griffith, 2019) and create a possible crisis for the future of modern law enforcement in America (Police Executive Research Forum, 2021). Nationwide, anti-police sentiments led to retirements, resignations, and the loss of skilled law enforcement officers, which was detrimental to the officers in the police departments and the safety of the members of the communities (Floyd, 2022).

Anti-police sentiments have deposed questions about job satisfaction of law enforcement officers, leaving general attitude and morale in question due to how communities interact with law enforcement officers and the challenges of fear from both the communities and the officers (Pooley & Turns, 2022, Wyllie, 2022). Additionally, and with the loss of many law enforcement officers due to riots, protests, and anti-police sentiments, the remaining law enforcement officers

were tasked with excessive overtime due to workforce shortages, which created work burnouts with little to no relief (Police Executive Research Forum, 2021).

According to Pooley and Turns (2022), the American law enforcement profession has faced the most fundamental question of legitimacy. The essence of law enforcement and policing has been examined and debated in many cities due to negative video recordings of officer brutalities, lack of compassion, and law enforcement officers' unjustifiable actions (Pooley & Turns, 2022). Law enforcement officers have struggled to understand that communities have turned against them, and the morale of officers has continued to depreciate nationwide, especially in big cities (Griffith, 2019).

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed was the nationwide decline in the morale of law enforcement officers in the United States (Police Executive Research Forum, 2021). Anti-police sentiments have villainized the entire law enforcement profession because of the misconduct of a few, and morale has been damaged (Floyd, 2022). According to Arcuri (2020), the challenges to morale could cause critical concerns related to employees' motivation levels, job satisfaction, and even burnout. Morale has been questioned due to continued nationwide anti-police sentiments, and according to research from the Police Executive Research Forum (2021), there was an overall 18% increase in the resignation rates in 2020–2021 compared to 2019–2020.

According to MacFarquhar (2021), in New York City, the police department decreased by 8% of their patrol officers, and in Seattle, there were 150 fewer patrol officers than expected; however, the study did not discuss the reason for those departures. In Minneapolis, the police department reported that 20% of their 850 police officers turned in their resignations, leaving the city of Minneapolis under-patrolled (Eligon, 2020). In New Mexico, 20 law enforcement officers

resigned from the Albuquerque Police Department Emergency Response Team following counterprotests of adverse politically motivated administrative disciplinary action, lack of moral support, and lack of trust (Abundis, 2021). Hilal and Litsey (2020) observed an increase in police turnover of up to 11% from 2010, and according to Lurye (2020), in Hartford, there was an increase in retirements driven by months of anti-police sentiments and requests for law enforcement accountability reforms.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how national ongoing anti-police sentiment shaped the morale of law enforcement officers in a southern state that did not experience issues of defunding and riots that many areas of the country experienced. This study was aimed at understanding the impact of law enforcement's morale during the wake of anti-police sentiments and the ongoing impact of anti-police sentiments based on current events in a southern state. The interview questions were framed around the participant's perceptions of what morale was like with national ongoing anti-police sentiments, and it was vital to engage each participant in a thoughtful exploration of their perceptions of their morale.

The targeted population for this research consisted of active law enforcement officers who were working post-George Floyd's death in 2020, within a large county in a southern state in the United States. This county employs over 2,000 full-time sworn law enforcement officers and 1500 reserve officers. Considering the number of employed officers full-time, the initial pool of law enforcement officers was up to 2000 officers in the department. The sampling frame consisted of all qualified participants identified by time in service as a law enforcement officer post-George Floyd 2020 in the southern state law enforcement agency. The sample size used was based on Alder and Alder (2012), sample size selection, which recommended a broad range of

participants between 12 and 60, with 30 participants being the optimum number used to achieve saturation and a good sample size. The sampling saturation, however, was achieved at 30, but I continued to sample four more law enforcement officers to ensure no new themes existed, totaling the sample size of the 34 participants who responded.

A formal request was sent seeking permission to utilize the law enforcement agency to participate in an in-depth case study on understanding the morale of law enforcement officers in a southern state, and permission was granted (see Appendix A). I was informed via the agency's executive leader's permission letter to contact and communicate with the Public Information Officer (PIO) to facilitate the request for the research. Upon Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I contacted the PIO via email and respectfully request that the attached recruitment email (see Appendix B) be sent out to all law enforcement officers, with a description of the eligibility criteria for voluntary participants.

Each volunteer participant had the option of contacting the researcher via phone or email to set up the time required for the interview. The recruitment invitation letter explained that the research case study was voluntary and that there would be a raffled drawing of three 100.00-dollar gift cards at the end of the research study publication. All three winners were notified via email to contact the researcher to collect the gift card at a convenient location of their choice. To ensure a smooth process for all, winners who requested the same location preferences were provided staggered pick-up times. The inclusion of at least 34 eligible law enforcement officers within the law enforcement agency gained enough participant saturation to complete the case study in a timely manner. Qualified participants were required to be full-time employees of the agency with over 5 years of service and who worked in any patrol zone (motorcycle, tactical or patrol unit).

The study employed a convenient sampling strategy to select the first 30 eligible full-time law enforcement officers who volunteered to participate following the email distributed by the PIO officer. However, the sample size was deemed sufficient after the first 34 participants were attained. Should the recruitment efforts have failed to yield a sufficient sample size, then additional law enforcement officers who replied would have been selected from the given pool of participants. The snowball sampling technique was used and each qualifying law enforcement officer who initiated contact with the researcher was given the opportunity to participate in the case study research until saturation was achieved. At the beginning of the interview, each participant was asked to give verbally informed consent and advised to address any concerns before the interview.

The interview was conducted face-to-face at various locations, including a private office, conference rooms, and residence. In addition, each participant was assured that every participant would be treated equally and that all interviews would be conducted with the same script. All participants were allowed the time and opportunity to review and edit their responses to prevent the researcher's bias or any transcription errors. This qualitative case study was analyzed using thematic analysis with NVivo to facilitate the coding process.

Introduction to Theoretical Framework

General strain theory served as the theoretical lens for analyzing perceived morale in this case study. Robert Agnew developed general strain theory in 1992 (Agnew & White, 1992; Jennings et al., 2018). General strain theory is a distinctive approach to the strain of morale and the emotions that create the pressure for corrective actions or reactions (McCoy & Pugh, 2014). General strain theory includes the adjustments for the individual on three levels: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (Agnew, 1992). General strain theory includes several explanations of

behavior that are characterized by the idea an individual attempts to alleviate strain or frustration and promote goals for their members without the opportunities to achieve them; this can lead to negative emotions and create pressure for actions or reactions (McCoy & Pugh, 2014). Some people may retreat as a response to strain, rejecting both cultural goals and institutional means (McCoy & Pugh, 2014).

Exploring law enforcement's morale through general strain theory highlighted the perceived strain of morale with the national ongoing anti-police sentiments and the emotions that created the pressure for a corrective action or reaction. Since morale has been an ambiguous concept that can sometimes be a component of satisfaction or dissatisfaction based on work experiences in any field of work or profession (Frank et al., 2017; Miller & Boyle, 2017; Spiller, 1996), strain theory was suitable for this study because it allowed for the investigation of a law enforcement officer's perceptions on morale with continued national ongoing anti-police sentiments. A low-morale situation in law enforcement could lead to an unmanageable crisis that could be increasingly difficult to resolve.

Introduction to Research Methodology and Design

A qualitative case study research design and methodology was used to dive deeper into the subjective data and experiences of each participant. Qualitative research has been primarily concerned with meaning and offers a dynamic approach to this research (Willig, 2023). This methodology focused on obtaining data through open-ended and conversational communication like interviews, in addition to a research approach that was primarily concerned with the study of the nature, quality, and meaning of human experiences (Mcleod, 2019; Willig, 2023). According to Johnson and Johnson (2011) and Willig (2023), qualitative case study research design has always been an active investigation of the human experiences that explain a more in-depth

picture and take a range of different positions in relation to questions. Since this study examined human experiences, this research approach and case study design was fitting for examining the experiences of law enforcement.

A case study design was used in this qualitative research method to serve as the tool needed in the process of collecting and obtaining information from the human experiences (Lopez-Sierra, 2020). The case study design was centered on the subjective, firsthand accounts of a participant's perceived morale amidst rising national anti-police sentiments. This research design provided a thorough and insightful understanding of the participating law enforcement officer's department in a southern state's law enforcement agency.

Research Questions

The problem addressed in this qualitative research was the morale of law enforcement officers when dealing with anti-police sentiments and national anti-police sentiments. Participants were asked to detail their perceptions of one or more instances where morale was questioned due to anti-police sentiments within their communities and their agency. By using a case study approach and conducting structured face-to-face interviews, this research aimed to provide a valid answer to the following question:

RQ1

How do law enforcement officers perceive their morale during national ongoing anti-police sentiments?

Significance of the Study

This study was intended to gain an understanding of the impact national ongoing anti-police sentiments had on the morale of law enforcement officers in a southern state. Analyzing the link between public sentiment and officer behavior helps identify ways to boost morale and

improve, action, and reactions amid ongoing national anti-police sentiments. Persistent low morale can create a systemic ripple effect, leading to accelerated attrition, increased liability through heightened use of force incidents, and a degradation of operational safety that compromises both officer wellness and public trust. The results of this study could enhance daily operations and better address a law enforcement officers' concerns and discouragement, provided that it indicated a positive morale within the law enforcement agency. Law enforcement officers have served as a crucial pillar of community safety, acting as the primary guardians of public order and enforcing law. These results could have long-term ramifications that could impact the individual law enforcement officer and the law enforcement agencies that rely on positive morale to keep high staffing numbers, generational law enforcement officer's recommendations to the police force, and the assistance of senior officers that further assist in the training of new recruits and field training (Shjarback. 2022).

Definitions of Key Terms

Burnout

Burnout was defined in this study as a state of emotional, physical, or psychological condition influenced by workers overexposed to stress in the workplace or their working environment (Allen, 2001). Burnout was not modeled with specific diagnostic symptoms or a defined critical threshold; however, when work demands became excessive, it manifested as a significant impediment to employee performance and professional functioning. Burnout is a systemic issue arising from chronic workplace stress, requiring comprehensive structural, cultural, and leadership driven changes rather than just individual-focused solutions. Burnout has been known to be unpredictable in its timing and has created demotivation, depression, post-

traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), nervous breakdowns, or even worse (Allen, 2001; Moss, 2021).

Blue Wall of Silence

The blue wall of silence also known as blue code and blue shield, was a term used to identify the supposed informal code of silence among law enforcement officer in the United States not to report on another officer's errors, misconducts, or crimes (Phelps, 2002). It has been an unspoken law enforcement code of conduct that forbids officers from speaking out against a fellow officer, even when an abuse of power has occurred. Other experts maintained that the blue wall of silence was not the only reason law enforcement used excessive force to subdue suspects, but that it also included racist attitudes, assertive strategies, inadequate training, and lenient treatment by prosecutors and the leadership in law enforcement (Phelps, 2002).

Ferguson Effect

The Ferguson Effect is the speculated increase in violent crime rates caused by the reduction of proactive policing due to community distrust and hostility towards law enforcement (Hosko, 2018). It has been described as the de-policing consequences associated with the negative outcries of public sentiments after the murder of Michal Brown Ferguson in Ferguson, Missouri (Capellan et al., 2019). Veteran law enforcement officers in Ferguson reported "they had never experienced nothing like that last three years" (Hosko, 2018, para 3) and recognized the impact of severe and deadly use of force incidents regarding the amplifying effect of the media, social media, police funding and training challenges (Hosko, 2018).

Generational Law Enforcement Officer

Generational was the adjective of generation related to the different generations within a family (Schwarz, 2015). Generational law enforcement officers were officers who chose to work

in the profession of law enforcement because their dads, grandfathers, great-grandfathers, great-great-grandfathers, and ancestors all worked in the field of law enforcement or upheld the law in some capacity. Generational law enforcement officers have undergone the training necessary to perform duties for various law enforcement jobs and have compared their jobs, responsibilities duties, or ranks to that of their ancestors (Schwarz, 2015).

Law Enforcement Officer

A law enforcement officer or peace officer was an officer who has undergone the training necessary to perform duties needed for a wide variety of law enforcement jobs and within a wide variety of organizations (Follett et al., 2020). The qualifications of law enforcement were dependent on the job that was selected and can range from being a police officer, customs officer, state trooper, border patrol, marshal, deputy, special agent, and many additional sworn officers that have been granted the power to enforce the law within their jurisdictions. A law enforcement officer's primary responsibility was to protect lives and property, and in almost all situations, they were expected to fulfill their duties and responsibilities whether they were on or off duty (Smith, 2014).

Morale

Morale has been a spiritual quality thought to be desirable to soldiers; it was a concept most beloved by generals and staff officers concerned with military actions *en masse*. The history of morale has been bound up with the history of cultural sensibilities and how society regards human life. Morale was also seen as the mental and emotional conditions of an individual or group regarding a function or a task at hand (Spiller, 1996).

Police Ride-Along Program

The police ride-along program also known as Police Observer Program (POP), was an arrangement for a civilian to spend a shift in the passenger seat of an emergency vehicle, while observing the workday of a law enforcement officer (Wozniak et al., 2022). It was created to refocus and promote a positive image of law enforcement (Mathna & Koen, 2023). The police officer ride-along program was also an effort to build community relations and create transparency within law enforcement, in addition to assisting in the human factor studies related to the physical and cognitive demands of law enforcement officer (Wozniak et al., 2022).

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

PTSD was a term introduced to Psychiatry in the 1980s after the Vietnam War to identify and explain the stress of exposure to severe trauma during wartime (Marcovitch, 2018). PTSD included but was not limited to physical injury, warfare, rape, exposure to crime scenes, deaths, and other events and major loss of life or threat to loss of life. PTSD is known as a mental health condition that could be triggered after a person experienced a terrifying event that caused uncontrollable thoughts about the event, flashbacks of the traumatic event, depression, severe anxiety, nightmares, and has created emotional illnesses (Mayo Clinic, 2011).

Stress Level

Stress level was a term used to refer to the amount of stress that an individual experienced or coped with (Miller, 2019). A stress level could be a positive force that enhances motivation or a negative force that could impair functioning. Stress levels could be very unpleasant, even when they are temporary. When stress levels are long-lasting, it could have negative effects on an individual's health (Miller, 2019).

Thin Blue Line

The thin blue line was the perception that officers were the line that stood between good citizens and those who threatened social order (Nhan, 2014). It was most recognized as the expectation within police culture that officers would always adhere to a prescribed culture (Doreian & Conti, 2017). The rhetoric behind the notion of the thin blue line was stated during the 2015 presidential campaign, where Donald Trump referred to the police as the force between civilization and total chaos (Sinha, 2022). To plainly understand, the thin blue line style of thinking and emphasis on coercion must give way to better strategies for maintaining peace and upholding values on behalf of all in society and within communities (Hodges & Pugh, 2018).

To Protect and Serve

“To protect and to serve” has long been a slogan used by police departments throughout the United States, identifying the service and mission of law enforcement officers as providing a safe community for all residents (Garrett, 2006, p. 1). The slogan “to protect and to serve” was also a catchphrase that originated in the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), that became a mission statement and the official motto of the police academy that was kept constantly before law enforcement officers in training as the aim and purpose of their profession. The catchphrase identified the exceptional pride, respect, and honor previously taken by law enforcement officers (Garett, 2006).

Summary

This case study was intended to determine the perceptions of law enforcement officers’ morale with ongoing anti-police sentiments in a southern state in the United States. The introduction detailed the topic of the morale of law enforcement officers and why the problem of morale exists with ongoing anti-police sentiment. The statement of the problem addressed the in-

depth problem for law enforcement officers associated with the existence of ongoing anti-police sentiment. The purpose explained the reason and the research method used to explore the perceived morale of law enforcement officers with national ongoing anti-police sentiments. The theoretical framework presented the key concepts that guided the research decisions of the relevant study of morale, in addition to the research methodology and design that gave the description of the data collection procedures and analysis. The research question directed the scope of the answer, whereas the significance of the study highlighted why examining law enforcement officer morale was essential. The next chapter focused on reviewing relevant literature and analyzing the theoretical framework.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how national ongoing anti-police sentiment shaped the morale of law enforcement officers in a southern state that did not experience issues of defunding and riots that many areas of the country experienced. The problem addressed was the nationwide decline in the morale of law enforcement officers within the United States (Police Executive Research Forum, 2021). The morale among law enforcement officers has been a critical motivation in performance and their overall well-being (Pender et al., 2017; Rivera-Vasquez, 2014). However, in recent history, ongoing anti-police sentiments and morale among law enforcement officers have decreased throughout the United States (Police Executive Research Forum, 2021). The theories, perspectives, and research on law enforcement officers' morale were explored, and in-depth investigation and analysis demonstrated that there was a lack of research in which national ongoing anti-police sentiments have been a factor.

The literature review began with an examination of the literature on general strain theory (GST), the theoretical framework that helped guide this research conducted with the distinctive approach to the strain of morale and the emotions that create the pressure for corrective actions and reactions. General strain theory was relevant as the adjustments for individuals on behavioral, emotional, and cognitive levels (Agnew, 1992), directly impacted morale in the workforce. Using general strain theory as the guiding framework, stress related to morale and the perceptions of work-related anti-police sentiments were highlighted when discussing the significance and need to understand how law enforcement officers view morale in their daily lives. The literature review highlighted morale, the Ferguson effect, and the post-Ferguson era, along with the daily discussions of situational strains of law enforcement officers, the support of their leadership, and the communities in which antipolice sentiments have surfaced.

Following that, I reviewed a variety of research related to work, morale, and the stress associated with being a law enforcement officer. I explored the occupational stressors of being in law enforcement, the operational stressors of daily activities, and the organizational stressors related to a lengthy list of stresses associated with daily work and life balances, along with additional stressors associated with the job of being a law enforcement officer. Following that, I reviewed the leadership of law enforcement officers, followed by the culture and mental health, in addition to the changes in law enforcement.

Additionally, I reviewed the recruitment and retention factors along with the historical events that led to anti-police sentiment and national ongoing anti-police sentiments. Furthermore, I considered the response between anti-police sentiments and the morale of law enforcement officers. Historically, the primary role of law enforcement officers has been to protect lives and maintain law and order within their communities. In this research, I hope to identify if there are any changes in the morale of law enforcement officers with national ongoing anti-police sentiments and this thought will be explored within the literature review and throughout the data collection process.

Literature Retrieval

The literature review was conducted between the years of 2018 and 2024, in which most of the information gathered for this literature review was attained through National University. The strategy I used when conducting the literature review explored professional journals, published articles, and scholarly works on the topic of law enforcement officers' morale and anti-police sentiments with search parameters between 2014 and 2024. Information was accessed through the Northcentral University Library Roadrunner catalog, Sage Journals Online, ProQuest Research Library, Statista, ResearchGate, Hein Online, EBSCOhost, Web of Knowledge,

PsycArticles, ScienceDirect, and Social Sciences Citation Index. Additionally, articles were reviewed from the United States Department of Justice (USDOJ), the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS), and the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) using additional search parameters between 1945 and 2023. Other areas explored for the literature review were Google Scholar data sites and links to other Google search engines that aided tracking down free organizational articles on morale and anti-police sentiments.

The search parameters varied throughout the course of the research and obtained information related to the research. Keywords used were *law enforcement officer, police officer, cop, sheriff's department, deputies, and public service officer* simultaneously with keywords such as *morale, anti-police sentiments, national anti-police sentiments, stress, and use of force*. Additionally, combinations such as *morale and law enforcement, morale and occupational stress, morale and operational stress, morale and organizational stress*, in addition to the *culture of law enforcement, the stress of law enforcement, the Ferguson Effect, communication and occupational stress, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and morale, support of leadership and morale, mental health and morale, and changes in organizational procedures and morale*. Additional key phrases used to identify potential reference material were: (a) *morale and policing*, (b) *general strain theory and law enforcement* (c) *procedural justice theory and morale*, (e) *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and anti-police sentiments*, (f) *application of general strain theory to law enforcement officers*, (h) *factors that influence police morale*, (i) *coping with anti-police sentiments*, (j) *psychological impact of anti-police sentiment to law enforcement morale* (k) *morale and the Ferguson effect*.

There were a variety of academic articles in the literature that focused on general strain theory, the functionality of law enforcement officers, race and gender differences, the historical impact of the Ferguson effect, and the impact of the death of George Floyd. These articles were not the main foundation for the research but served as a guide to develop the academic framework in which law enforcement officers' morale would be explored. The varied age of articles established the historical perspective into how the study of law enforcement's morale has continued to maintain its relevance, with the oldest article dating back to 1945. Furthermore, the varied age of the articles has also demonstrated the historical impact on law enforcement's morale due to racial disparities and anti-police sentiments. For this research, most articles used were written in the 21st century. However, in the wake of anti-police sentiments and national ongoing anti-police sentiments, articles from the 20th century were used to establish the historical impact on the morale of law enforcement officers.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used to guide this research was Agnew's general strain theory (GST) developed by Robert Agnew in 1992 (Agnew, 1992) and since its proposal, general strain theory has become one of the most influential and commonly tested theoretical frameworks (Agnew, 2012). According to Agnew (1992) general strain theory included three basic constructs: strain, negative emotionality, and coping resources. The general strain has been "distinguished by its focus on negative relationships with others and its insistence that such relationships led to delinquency through the negative effect" (Agnew, 1992, p. 49). Negative emotionality has been defined as the negative affective states related to emotions such as anger that can arise in reaction to negative stimuli that further increases the need for an individual to

find corrective actions as means of managing or alleviating those negative emotions (Agnew, 1992).

Agnew's coping resources have been identified with three types of mechanisms that included cognitive, behavioral, and emotional (Agnew, 1992). Cognitive coping was defined as a skill that allows an individual to change the way they feel by changing the way they think (Agnew, 1992). According to Agnew (1992), cognitive coping occurred when the individual attempted to minimize or deny negative feelings and proposed that positive thinking can be used to decrease negative emotions or act on negative emotions. Behavioral coping was defined as modifying actions based on stressful events (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Agnew (1992) identified that behavioral coping occurred when the individual has acted to permanently solve the perceived cause of their negative feelings and proposed that actions taken can permanently solve a negative feeling.

Emotional coping was defined as efforts at reducing stress through emotional expressions (Endler & Parker, 1994). Agnew (1992) referred to emotional coping as when an individual does not seek to deny or solve negative feelings but only to reduce negative emotions. It was therefore proposed that emotional coping has been related to the release of emotional expressions that provided outlets but not permanent solutions (Agnew, 1992). The process of cognitive coping, behavioral coping, and emotional coping all align with factors related to stress responses in both positive and negative occurrences.

To address GST, Agnew (1992) laid out a more intricate description of the relationship between strain and crime. Agnew (1992) stated that strain could lead to crime which was a conditional link to other factors specifically crime and delinquency. In 1992, Agnew identified three major sources of strain that represented certain types of negative relationships with others

including failure to attain positive goals, presentation of toxic stimuli, and the absence of positive stimuli (Agnew, 2001). According to Agnew (2001), the failure to attain positive goals included the disjunction between expectations and actual outcomes, the presentation of toxic stimuli represented physical and emotional stress, and the absence of positive stimuli represented negative events or negative experiences. This strain has led to negative effects such as anger, depression, disappointment, and even fear (Agnew 1992).

General strain theory evolved from early theorists such as Robert Merton (1938) who described strain theory as society's way of placing pressure on individuals to achieve society's accepted goals (such as living the American dream), even though they lacked the means of achieving that goal. Albert Cohen (1955) claimed that stress came from a lack of status in society, and Cloward and Ohlin (1960) insisted that crime was caused by the strain between one's aspirations and their means of achieving that aspiration. These researchers correlated this theory with the lower class in society's need to achieve financial success and thus treated strain as a social structural variable (Morris et al., 2014).

Agnew's (1992) general strain theory was derived from Merton's (1938) strain theory (ST) in criminology to address the shortcomings and vague descriptions which did not account for criminal activity not involved in financial gain. According to Merton's (1938), strain was caused by a lack of congruence in cultural aspirations and institutionalized ways of accomplishing goals. Agnew's (1992) recognized multiple sources of strain in addition to the disjunction between goals and means. The development of Agnew's general strain theory was in response to the criticisms against Merton's strain theory, the difference between one's economic aspirations and their actual means of achieving those aspirations (Agnew, 1992).

Agnew's strain theories focused on adolescents, which maintained that adolescents were not only interested in futuristic goals, but had additional aspirations such as good grades, popularity, and athletics (Agnew 1985; Elliot et al., 1985). In 1985, Agnew broadened the focus on previous strain theory and argued that delinquency resulted from the inability to escape legally from painful or aversive situations. Agnew (1992) further expanded on Merton's definition of strain that included the discrepancies between culturally defined goals and the institutionalized means available to achieve these goals and explained that an individual's coping strategy is the determining factor of whether one would engage in crime.

Robert Agnew revised strain theory to show its position in the criminal justice system and to broaden the focus of the theory to a more complete typology of the sources of the strain (Agnew 1992). In 1992, Agnew proposed that general strain theory was used to explain delinquent behavior committed by juveniles (Agnew, 1992). As proposed in general strain theory, other variables such as coping resources could influence the relationship between strain and deviant, delinquent, or criminal behavior (Agnew, 1992). According to Agnew (1992), deviant behavior was an inevitable outcome of distress, delinquent behavior was a result of a certain amount of pressure, especially in adolescents, and criminal behavior was caused by the presence of negative emotions resulting from an array of strain.

Strain theory was typically focused on "the relationships which prevents the individual from achieving positively valued goals" (Agnew, 1992, pp. 48-49). Agnew later broadened the theory to include "the relationship in which others present the individual with noxious or negative stimuli" (Agnew, 1992, p. 49). Agnew's general strain theory addressed that certain strains placed on members of society may lead certain individuals to engage in criminal activities (Agnew 1992).

In 2012, the general strain theory was used to examine workplace strain among law enforcement officers (Moon & Johnson, 2012). According to Moon and Johnson (2012), strain identified in general strain theory significantly impacted law enforcement officers' commitments to their agencies. General strain theory was used to examine deviant behavior committed by law enforcement (Moon & Johnson, 2012). According to Moon and Johnson (2012), law enforcement officers experienced strain, which occurred when they were disliked by groups of individuals.

Law enforcement officers went through much strain in performing their daily duties and when they did not receive support from their communities which created the experiences of strain (Bishopp et al., 2020). Bishopp et al. (2020) conducted research to understand police stress and race using general strain theory to examine racial differences in police misconduct. Capellan et al. (2020) identified that the relationship between the community and law enforcement officers were tied to the morale displayed within the law enforcement agency. The decrease in workplace morale caused law enforcement officers to engage in egotistic and deviant behaviors that were counterproductive (Capellan et al., 2020).

This study aimed at understanding the decline of a law enforcement officer's morale during the wake of anti-police sentiments and ongoing national anti-police sentiments based on current events in a southern state's law enforcement agency. According to Stirling (2022), there has been a significant decline in the morale of law enforcement officers. Agnew's general strain theory was used as the theoretical framework in this research to understand if the morale of law enforcement officers has been affected by national ongoing anti-police sentiments and hopes to highlight the stresses and strains generated from negative reactions. According to Stirling (2022), morale in the workplace has been found to be impactful from both a positive and negative

perspective. Research surrounding general strain theory has focused on the perspective that has been applied to examine the various strains associated with the absence of positive stimuli and the introduction to negative stimuli (Johnson, 2015). Agnew's general strain theory was significant because it focused on the negative relationship with others and highlighted truths that explain the presence of negative emotions resulting in an array of strain. Additionally, Agnew's general strain theory has focused on the significant relationships in which others presented the individual with negative stimuli (Agnew, 1992).

Morale

According to Gocke (1945), morale was the term used to express a person's state of mind regarding courage, zeal, confidence, and similar qualities. Good morale was the state of mind and the willpower to perform a job to the best of one's abilities, to take setbacks with the least resistance, and to hold out for the longest time (Gocke, 1945). Spiller (1996) described morale as a spiritual quality thought to be a desirable trait in soldiers and believed that morale was meant to be described as a sublime, self-denying state of being that transpired when a group gains a sense of purpose. The term morale has been assumed to be positively directed and expected that soldiers maintained a high morale based on the direction of leadership and a strong belief in a higher purpose (Michaud et al., 2024; Spiller, 1996). Millett (2010) listed six main reasons why high employee morale was important and these reasons included: improved productivity, improved performance, and creativity, reduced paid time taken for leave, greater mindfulness, a safe workplace, and increased quality of labor. Michaud et al. (2024) concluded that psychological empowerment harnessed a motivated state for morale, well-being, and readiness.

The morale of law enforcement officers in the United States has been a long-standing interest with the earliest article published by B. W. Gocke in 1945. Law enforcement officers

need good morale to accomplish their daily objectives which sometimes include troublesome problems, setbacks, and even discouragements (Callender et al., 2020). Insufficient leadership has resulted in negative consequences and often immediate supervisors played a key role in the morale and retention of their departments and agencies (Michaud et al., 2024; Schafer, 2009). Shjarback (2022) and Gillian (2017) indicated common factors of low morale were due to low pay, poor benefits, long hours, and not enough staffing.

According to Stirling (2022), an additional decline in law enforcement officer's morale was due to toxic leadership and public antipathy. Concerns about losing funding and other resources in the political environment have also affected the morale of law enforcement officers (Berman & Jackson, 2021). The lack of support included President Biden's executive order which stopped the purchases of surplus US military equipment by the police department (Lynch, 2021). Furthermore, the lack of support and negativity towards law enforcement officers was one of the most consequential factors of low morale and increased stress that created prominent levels of doubt, skepticism, and futuristic uncertainty (Berman & Wilfrom, 2020; Stirling, 2022; Stogner, 2020).

Morale Enhancement

Morale enhancement has been defined as an intervention that leaves an individual in an increased state of being more elevated than they otherwise would have been (Douglas, 2013). In law enforcement, morale enhancement has encompassed finding opportunities to open or bridge communication gaps, provide tools needed to perform daily tasks, avoid micromanaging, and has contributed continued support (Douglas, 2013). Morale enhancement has been everyone's responsibility, while promoting the act of taking minimal risk (Roman, 2013). Strong leaders have provided enhanced motivation and engagement by focusing on the development of all their

employees (Church, 2014). Morale has improved when an officer felt valued, recognized, and appreciated (Thoen et al., 2020). The simple act of voicing sincere appreciation when a law enforcement officer has completed a case or has managed a situational event has significant positive impact.

In a high-risk occupation as a law enforcement officer, the morale of law enforcement officers has been enhanced when a higher-ranking officer has acknowledged a job well done (Paoline & Gau, 2020). Within a community setting as a law enforcement officer, the morale enhancement of law enforcement officers has relied on the effective collaboration between law enforcement officers and the communities in which they serve (Tung, 2020). Building positive relationships within communities has helped law enforcement officers feel more connected and therefore increased an officer's sense of purpose. According to Marier and Moule (2018), poor morale has resulted in parochialism.

Morale Reduction

Reducing morale among members of the workforce negatively affects the effectiveness, productivity, and efficiency in any working environment (Anjum et al., 2018). In law enforcement, the safety of officers and the public have been paramount, and reduced morale can impact an agency in numerous ways from safety, productivity, retention, to unprofessional conduct (Lawrence & Coon, 2005).

Researchers have found that the relationship that existed between a community and law enforcement agencies, whether negative or positive, has affected the morale of law enforcement officers (Stirling, 2022). The lack of support from communities was one of the most consequential drivers of poor morale among law enforcement officers (Berman & Wilfrom, 2020; Stogner et al., 2020). According to Callender et al. (2018) researchers have proposed a

solution of increased capacity in terms of law enforcement officer's staffing while reducing the community's demands for law enforcement officers. Furthermore, a shift has been needed in the culture of law enforcement based on a shared vision to be critical for the future of law enforcement officers and their morale (Thoen et al., 2020).

Morale and Race-Relationship

Race-relationships in law enforcement have played a key role in the importance of community-based relationships and stewardship (Cooper, 2020). According to Cooper (2020), in the wake of the death of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at the hands of law enforcement officers, activists for justice focused their sights on the injustices of policing and systemic racism which in the year 2020, created social activism. The death of George Floyd in the summer of 2020, has changed how communities interact with law enforcement and there was a significant decline in the morale of law enforcement officers (Stirling, 2022). Marier and Moule (2018) found that communities needed to be more concerned with a law enforcement officer's morale because poor morale resulted in the disconnection from their communities.

Morale, The Ferguson Effect, and Post-Ferguson Era

Although American law enforcement agencies have faced several crises throughout history, scholars have argued that the institution of law enforcement experienced its greatest turning point in the summer of 2014 (Shjarback, 2022). Several high-profile recorded deadly force cases which include Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, Laquan McDonald, and Walter Scott led to protests, demonstrations, civil disorder, demands for police reform, and the creation of the President's task force on 21st-century policing (Shjarback, 2022). There was increased scrutiny of law enforcement officers and public outrage over racial discrimination and law enforcement's use of force (De Angelis et al., 2016). Capellan et al.

(2020) found that many law enforcement officers were afraid that by doing their job the way they were taught, the community they served would not cooperate with them.

Law enforcement officers who were disciplined for using excessive force concluded that any use of force would have negative consequences, therefore, decreasing the level of policing (Capellan et al., 2020). The Ferguson effect was first used by St. Louis Metropolitan Police Chief Sam Dotson in 2014 and was labelled by the media, to capture the notion of prolonged negative publicity that emerged after the shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson Missouri in 2014 (Copeland et al., 2022). Deuchar et al. (2019) theorized that the negative publicity law enforcement officers have experienced in the wake of incidents such as Michael Brown in 2014, resulted in the increase in violence against law enforcement officers. Laverone (2017) and Adam (2019) completed two qualitative case studies that suggested the poor morale of law enforcement officers and the Ferguson effect pressured some officers into quitting or almost quitting their jobs.

In 2015, anti-police sentiments, public scrutiny, exposure to trauma, and violence took a toll on the morale and lives of law enforcement officers (Bishopp et al., 2020). The Ferguson effect phenomenon of increased violent crime rates in a community caused by reduced proactive policing, further intensified in the following years by the availability of other violent public interactions with law enforcement officers, propagated through social media and video footage of the events immediately airing via live TV (Copeland et al., 2022). The media and some law enforcement officials have blamed the Ferguson effect for many social problems, difficulties that local law enforcement officers have experienced, the morale of law enforcement, and the decreased recruitment and retention of law enforcement officers within agencies (Copeland 2022, Dogan, 2017; Jackman, 2018).

Shjarback (2022) found that the rise in national attention and criticisms towards law enforcement in the wake of Ferguson in the summer of 2014 and beyond, had negatively influenced law enforcement's morale, perceptions, and behaviors. Researchers reported that the public's attitudes toward law enforcement post the Ferguson era showed a decline in institutional trust, a negative perception of fairness and effectiveness, and an increased negative perception of the conduct of law enforcement (Copeland, 2022).

Culture of Law Enforcement

The cultural values of law enforcement officers have been shaped based on the officer's perceived working environment and how they act within it (Nhan, 2014). In the 1950s, the culture of law enforcement was shaped by the principles of the blue line, adopted for law enforcement professionals to represent the courage and sacrifices made while protecting and serving their communities (Rose & Unnithan, 2015; Wall, 2020). Traditional culture of law enforcement officers has been shaped by the principals of the thin blue line that has symbolized all law enforcement personnel (Rose & Unnithan, 2015; Wall, 2020).

Wall (2020) defined the phrase thin blue line as a sort of sacred, mystical character to the men and women in uniform. Additionally, an alternate component of the culture of law enforcement was the phase known as the blue wall of silence (Phelps, 2002). According to Phelps (2002), the blue wall of silence also known as blue code and blue shield of silence was a term used to identify the informal code of silence among law enforcement officers. Ivkovic et al. (2018) defined the blue code of silence as a subculture that prohibited the reporting of misconduct of other officers. Consequently, law enforcement's culture also had an us versus them mentality that was created and reinforced through officer selections, training, and work

experiences that ideally manifested into attitudes towards the civilian sectors which created a tacit acceptance of misconduct known as the blue wall of silence (Nhan, 2014).

Characteristics associated with the law enforcement culture include hyper-masculinity (Hassell et al., 2011), social isolation (McDonald, 2015) and cynicism towards a non-law enforcement individual or group (Nhan, 2014). The women in law enforcement align with their masculine counterparts and suppress their emotions to gain acceptance into the policing culture (Ryan & Ollis, 2019). Law enforcement officers who emerged into the culture tended to develop a hero complex and moral superiority that was believed to set them above their civilian counterparts (Garrett, 2015).

Research into the culture of law enforcement has been difficult due to the exclusive and reclusive nature surrounding the agency (Doreian & Conti, 2017). According to Doreian and Conti (2017), it was believed that someone who does not wear the uniform has no clear understanding of what is required to be a law enforcement officer. The culture of law enforcement or subcultures consisted of normative values that guide behaviors in an officer's working environment and while other occupational groups shared similar behavioral norms, the subculture of law enforcement officers have been extremely strong (Nhan, 2014). According to Nhan (2014), law enforcement officers assumed civilians are potentially dangerous, untrustworthy, and would break the law if left unattended.

According to Turner (2023), there has been a lot of interest in the culture of law enforcement for some time. The culture has been viewed as a barrier of long-overdue reforms, and there has been a consensus that law enforcement culture caused derision between the officers and the public (Marrier & Moule, 2018). As an introduction to the reform and changes directed to the culture of law enforcement agencies, there has been a demand for a focus on transparency

and accountability in the United States (Arango, et al., 2021; Ilchi, et al., 2022). Academics and activists have suggested that policies should include the requirement of independent investigations and prosecutions of police shootings (Ilchi et al., 2022).

Stress in Law Enforcement

Stress can be defined in several ways, but for the purpose of this research, work-related stress was used and has been listed as the second most common reported stress (Blake et al., 2021). Merriam-Webster (2024) defined stress as the experience caused by physical and mental tensions. The Center for Disease Control (CDC, 2004) defined stress as a response to environmental tensions or pressures and states that job stress is the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirement of the job does not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of a worker (CDC, 2004). Violanti (1983) stated that the working definition of stress was a perceived imbalance between social demands and perceived response capability under conditions where failure to meet demands has important consequences.

Stress has been found to correspond with low organizational commitment (Kula, 2017). For years, the public has viewed law enforcement officers as superiors, based on the duties imposed upon them by law and their criminal justice training when experiencing the daily emotional and physical distress of their job (Territo & Vetter, 1981). However, the job of law enforcement officers has been highly stressful because it is one of the few jobs where an employee has been asked continually to face physical danger and place their lives on the line at any given moment (Territo & Vetter, 1981). In 1974, Freudenberg completed research regarding burnout and occupational stress and identified the symptom as psychological disorder triggered by chronic exposure to work stress. According to Territo and Vetter (1981), studies have shown that there are 15 most prevalent stress warnings signs for law enforcement officers that included

sudden changes in behavior, erratic work habits, increased sick time, inability to maintain one's train of thoughts, and excessive worrying.

Stress has many ramifications and can produce many varied psychophysiology disturbances, that if intense and chronic enough, can lead to demonstrable organic disease of varying severity (Territo & Vetter, 1981). Studies have shown that law enforcement officers who experienced high-levels of stress reported an increase in rates of physical and psychological distress (Rivera-Vazquez, 2014). Angleman et al. (2022) found that 25-30% of law enforcement officers demonstrated stress-based physical health symptoms that included high blood pressure and coronary artery disease. Klimley et al. (2018) found that 13% of law enforcement officers demonstrated mental health symptoms of PTSD.

The job of a law enforcement officer has been ranked as one of the most physically and psychologically dangerous occupations (Toch, 2002; Water & Ussery 2007) and has strong negative effects on individuals, law enforcement agencies, and the communities in which they serve (Rivera-Vazquez, 2014). There have been predictors that stress in law enforcement has been directed to a lack of leadership and support (Hilal & Litsey, 2020). Stress has also fueled a law enforcement officer's desire to leave the job (Hassell et al., 2011).

According to Lawson et al. (2022), the stress of a law enforcement officer has been known to transcend across all aspects of law enforcement, including issues of patrolling beats, receiving insufficient support from senior officers, and working unpredictable hours. Law enforcement stressors have been categorized into four types that have included stressors internal to the organization, stressors in the job of law enforcement, stressors that confront the individual law enforcement officer, and stressors external to the law enforcement organization (Territo & Vetter, 1981).

Stressors Internal to the Organization

Stressors internal to the organization have been defined as harmful physical and emotional responses that occurred when the requirements of the job did not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of a worker (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Kula (2017) stated that stressors internal to the organization were situations wherein work-related factors interacted with a worker to change their psychological or physiological conditions such that the individual would be forced to deviate from normal functioning. Duxbury and Higgins (2012) found that key stressors included the need to deal with competing demands and understaffing.

Stressors internal to the organization of law enforcement officers included departmental practices and policies within the organization which included inadequate training, poor supervision, unsupportive organizational climate, inadequate or complicated technology resources, and poor or inadequate pay structures (Territo & Vetter, 1981). Additionally, there were poor reward systems or reinforcement systems for a job well done, excessive paperwork, frequent relocations, poor communications, discriminatory or unfair treatment, and ambiguous or conflicting task assignment (Craighead & Nemeroff, 2004; Territo & Vetter, 1981). Jaafar et al. (2024) stated that organizational stressors that included, lack of support or validation, demand, job pressure, administrative or organizational pressures, and long working hours may also have been an even greater source of stress.

Smith et al. (2022) surveyed 281 active-duty law enforcement officers on the perceived organizational support and its interaction with a voice (of being heard) on law enforcement officers' organizational cynicism, stress, and emotional exhaustion. Smith et al. (2022) findings resulted in evidence to support that if organizational leaders wish to prevent disadvantageous

outcomes such organizational cynicism, stress, and emotional exhaustion they would have to support and give a positive voice (of being heard) climate to their officers. Simmons-Beauchamp and Sharpe (2022) found that stressors internal to the organization such as discrimination and ineffective leadership impacted the mental health of law enforcement officers. Additionally, Presson (2023) found that stressors internal to the organization have been the changes of leadership within their various departments, squads, and agencies. Changes in leadership have affected the commodore and functionality of these various groups and created additional stress.

In addition, Presson (2023) stated that female law enforcement officers had a significantly higher stress rate than their male counterparts. According to Zimmerman et al. (2020), female law enforcement officers have struggled to gain recognition, promotions, and mentorship. Presson (2023) identified that staff shortages had a significant impact on female law enforcement officers as compared to male officers based on the perceived pressures to volunteer free time. In addition, Presson (2023) stated that female law enforcement officers often perceived that there was more organizational favoritism for their male counterparts.

Furthermore, additional stressors internal to the organization have been the demand for reform within law enforcement agencies (Quick & Piza, 2022). Additionally, the George Floyd Justice in Police Act of 2020, which is a federal law with a comprehensive approach to hold law enforcement officers accountable, change the culture of law enforcement, and addresses systemic racism cannot be mandated to any state. This bill has enhanced existing enforcement mechanisms to remedy violations by law enforcement and from a federal level, encourages states to do the same.

Stressors in the Work of Law Enforcement

The work of a law enforcement officer has been highly predictive of stress (Territo & Vetter, 1981). Stressors in the work of law enforcement have been defined as incidents that occur in the work environment of law enforcement officers (Dowler, 2005). Stressors in the work of law enforcement included shift work, especially rotating shifts, holdover times, role conflicts between enforcement and service to the community, interchange between fear and danger, fragmented case conclusions due to the nature of the job and case follow ups, constant exposure to individual and community distresses, boredom with sometimes immediate needs to be alerted and ready to handle complicated and sometimes deadly situational circumstance within the community, responsibility for the safety and well-being of others, and the constant need to represent the title and position that they hold as law enforcement officers (Queiros et al., 2020; Territo & Vetter, 1981).

In rural areas, law enforcement officers have experienced unique work-related health and safety risks that have been attributed to multiple factors ranging from inaccessible back up to navigating inclement weather (Ricciardelli, 2018). These law enforcement officers had to manage the fear and anxiety associated with the possibility of not having back up or being stranded during hostile encounters while patrolling (Westmarland & Rowe, 2018). Law enforcement officers have often been required to work irregular shifts and overtime duties, and in the face of danger, acknowledge the fact that they may not return home safely at the end of their shift (Moon & Jonson, 2012).

According to Yavas (2016), diminished work conditions in law enforcement have led to a decline in productivity, increased absenteeism, and high turnovers. In addition, the indirect link to stressors in the work of law enforcement officers has been due to unhealthy work hours

(Ricciardelli, 2018). According to Ricciardelli (2018), an officer's inability to have little to no time with their families can create additional stressors, especially during dedicated events such as birthdays, holidays, children sporting events, or other holiday celebrations that are interrupted due to shift work.

Additional stressors in the work of law enforcement officers have been the required use of body-worn cameras and continuously monitoring and recording (Deuchar et al., 2020). Some law enforcement officers have been stressed and concerned that the recordings on various crime scenes and arrest could possibly be used against them for disciplinary actions (Deuchar et al., 2020). Additionally, law enforcement officers feared that the use of body camera footage could be used to micromanage their work or could negatively impact their careers (Deuchar et al., 2020; Fallik et al., 2020). According to Wright and Brown (2020), body camera footage was used to track and verify the detailed interactions between the law enforcement officer and the public.

Fallik et al. (2020) indicated that apprehension regarding the misuse of body-worn camera footage by the media for reputational harm was a significant concern for law enforcement officers. Furthermore, considering the negative press against law enforcement officers and continued anti-police sentiments, transparency and accountability became the main focus of many law enforcement agencies (Fallik et al., 2020). Many law enforcement agencies granted media access to recordings or some parts of the recordings immediately after being accused of excessive force or unfairness (Bloch-Wehba, 2021). According to Fallik et al. (2020), law enforcement officers feared the instant access to the media and conveyed concerns that, no matter what was captured on the body camera recordings, they would be blamed and ridiculed by those opposed to police.

Stressors that Confront the Individual Law Enforcement Officer

Stressors that confront the individual law enforcement officer have been referred to as any physical, emotional, or psychological stress that can affect the law enforcement officer (Stratton, 1977). Stressors that confront the individual law enforcement officer have included the competency to do the job, the need to conform, being a member of a minority group, and being a female in the law enforcement community (Territo & Vetter, 1981). Additional stressors have been social status, attitude changes based on the criteria of the job requirements, family stress, additional training, and continued educational units or school classes to aid in their professional advancements (Territo & Vetter, 1981).

Furthermore, stressors that confront the individual law enforcement officer have also included negative interactions with another officer within the department, ranking and opportunities, biases and harassment, and overestimates and underestimates of physical abilities (Morash & Haar, 1995). McCoy and Aamodt (2010) stated that marriages involving law enforcement officers end in divorce approximately 75 % of the time, but this was still lower than their civilian counterpart. Additional factors have included suicidal ideations, loss of family members, domestic disputes, childcare issues, and many other common stressors (Hakan Can & Hendy, 2014).

Stressors that confronted the individual law enforcement officer have been their privacy (Territo & Vetter, 1981). Technology became so advanced that law enforcement officers were worried about their own privacy as well as the privacy of their family members (Mills & Bradley, 2023). Stressors that confront the individual law enforcement officer have been regulating a work-life balance. When law enforcement officers have been unable to find a balance between

their work and personal life, the stressors of having to choose between their career or personal life or commitment to their families have been unbearable (Zimmermann et al., 2020).

Sayed et al. (2019) stated that some law enforcement officers have used coping mechanisms in their family lives or used work as a detriment or traded off to their family. According to Sayed et al. (2019), law enforcement officers have justified these trade-offs as a needed necessary aspect of their job as an officer. Additional stressors that confront the individual law enforcement officer have been their personal health due to the demands of the job as a law enforcement officer (Territo & Vetter, 1981). According to Arrington (2023), high levels of stressors related to the job of law enforcement officer have caused health issues such as fatigue, psychological health problems, and obesity due to bad eating habits. Furthermore, and due to budget cuts, law enforcement officers have been directly affected with the abilities to achieve their positive valued personal goals (Moon & Jonson, 2012).

Stressors External to the Law Enforcement Organization

Stressors external to the law enforcement organizations have been described as external stresses that have stemmed from the criminal justice system, the criminal justice process, and the society at large (Kula, 2017). Law enforcement officers have been the gatekeepers of the law and the criminal justice process within the criminal justice system which has included federal, state, municipal law makers, correctional, parole, and rehabilitation (Pryce & Wilson, 2020). Stressors external to the law enforcement organization included an officer's frustration with the criminal justice system, which may have offered too much leniency to offenders or decisions that may restrict the methods of criminal suppression (Territo & Vetter, 1981). In addition to the continued waiting and inconsiderate timing of scheduled court proceedings, negative or distorted media reviews, lack of support from the administrative branch, lack of community resources, and

lack of the ineffectiveness of rehabilitation programs offered in the criminal justice system and its subsidiaries (Territo & Vetter, 1981).

Stressors external to the law enforcement organization are unfavorable attitudes of some minority communities which included race relations and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that became a very important and powerful influence on law enforcement agencies (Quick & Piza, 2022). “Numerous high-profile killings of unarmed Blacks between 2012-2016 sparked, then fanned the flames of Black Lives Matter” (Cooper, 2020 p. 623). Following the death of George Floyd, Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and similar organizations became skillful at protesting in extremely aggressive and disruptive manners (Cooper, 2020). The development of negative sentiments toward law enforcement officers in major cities by people of color enforced the public and perceptions of ongoing discrimination within law enforcement agencies (Cooper, 2020). Similarly, some have argued that the growth in anti-police rhetoric from the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement have created a dangerous and hostile environment for law enforcement officers (Canterbury 2016; Mac Donald 2016).

Stressor external to the law enforcement organization has been the news media’s reports of continued racism and lack of accountability by law enforcement officers (Tyson, 2022). According to Cooper (2020), law enforcement officers have seen significant challenges following the wake of high-profile incidents that involved officers and Black citizens. According to Brown (2024), the report of the news media has created biases and misleading perceptions with many situations involving the actions or responses of law enforcement officers. Furthermore, social media has become the most popular communication platform in this technological era (Ruth, 2023). Law enforcement officers are using social media to promote

themselves or help the public with immediate visualization of events and situations between law enforcement officers and citizens (Ruth, 2023).

Anti-police Sentiments. Anti-police sentiments have been referred to as a social group or individual's attitude and stance against the policing system (Reynolds, 2017). Merriam-Webster (2023) defined anti-police as opposed to or hostile towards the police. Anti-police sentiment has changed the way in which communities interact with law enforcement officers and conversely (Stirling, 2020). The increased attention from social media, the public, and politicians led to a rise in criticisms directed towards the entire law enforcement profession with outcries for de-policing and defunding (Shjarback, 2022; Walter, 2022).

In 1991, Rodney King, an African American male, was beaten by four law enforcement officers in Los Angeles, and riots broke out in response to the acquittal of those law enforcement officers (Langer & Wiener, 2023). In 2014, the shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri sparked riots (Ragland, 2018) that created a turning point in anti-police attacks and anti-police sentiment (McPherson, 2022). In 2015, the Department of Justice (DOJ) launched a civil right investigation into the Baltimore law enforcement agency following the death of Freddie Gray that created excessive protesting and riots in the city (Walter, 2022). The fear for physical safety developed uncertainty and an abundance of caution for law enforcement officers (Wolfe et al., 2018).

According to Walter (2022), many social activists have argued that the issues of brutality and bias within law enforcement agencies are systemic and not anecdotal. According to Hahn and Martin (2016), when residents in the communities felt validated and respected, they were more than willing to engage with law enforcement and work towards the greater good of their communities. However, when respect and faith was lost between the communities and law

enforcement, there was negative impact on law enforcement agencies (Carlson-Johnson et al., 2020; Stogner et al., 2020).

Law Enforcement's Response to Anti-police Sentiment. Law enforcement officials have made statements that social media postings should not be trusted, and that the public should refer to official sources for transparency and accuracy (Walter, 2022). Shjarback (2022) stated that much has been learned about the impact that the current socio-political climate has had on the perceptions and behaviors of law enforcement officers. The imbalances created by anti-police sentiments have not encouraged law enforcement officers to passionately engage in their work (Violanti et al., 2018). Agencies and their officers have engaged in de-policing behaviors, such as reductions in low-level discretionary arrests, vehicle stops, and less willingness to engage in community partnerships (Shjarback et al., 2017). Some law enforcement officers indicated that their motivation, morale, and productivity were drastically affected, whereas some were less impacted (Shjarback, 2022).

Shjarback (2022) stated research conducted online of more than 8000 officers in 2016 identified that 86% of the responding law enforcement officers indicated that high profile incidents between law enforcement and Black citizens have made their jobs harder. The national survey further identified that 93% have become concerned about safety, 76% have been reluctant to use force when it was appropriate, 75% believed interactions between law enforcement and Black citizens have become more tense, and 72% states in their departments that officer are now less willing to stop and question suspicious persons (Morin et al., 2017). Some law enforcement officers have responded to anti-police sentiments by choosing to stay within their department and their agencies (Choi, 2020).

Mental Health

Mental health has been defined as an individual's condition with regards to their psychological and emotional well-being (McCloskey, 2008). Law enforcement officers have been exposed to operational stressors while on duty, and repeated exposure to these stressors have been associated with mental illnesses (Jaafar et al., 2024). The job of a law enforcement officer has been one of the most mentally challenging occupations contending with the increased need for hypervigilance, threats, and lack of public support (Violanti, 2011). As a result, law enforcement officers have suffered from mental health problems at a rate greater than their civilian counterparts (Stogner et al., 2020). Finney et al. (2015) stated that the mental health of law enforcement officers has been a growing concern because law enforcement officers are routinely exposed to traumatic experiences that can affect their mental health and well-being.

According to Drew and Martin (2021), law enforcement officers were often exposed to negative stimuli and traumatic events that included death or injury, child abuse, elderly abuse, domestic violence, shootings, the loss or injury of a fellow officer, verbal abuse, automobile accidents, sexual abuse, drug trafficking, and many other crimes and negative activities. Jaafar et al. (2024) stated that job pressures and long hours have been great sources of mental health problems for law enforcement officers. The mental health of law enforcement officers has been a key contributor to how an officer performs their daily duties or how an officer processes situational events in their daily line of duty (Drew & Martin, 2021).

Shjarback (2022) stated that most law enforcement officers have been psychologically affected due to negative attention placed on law enforcement. However, many law enforcement officers did not seek help in the face of psychological strain (Carlson-Johnson et al., 2020). Xu et

al. (2015) found that law enforcement officers began to withdraw from personal relationships within their agencies as a means of conserving their remaining emotional resources.

Individuals who supported the socio-cultural demands of the culture of law enforcement have been found to have struggled with mental health concerns but have been unable to seek mental health assistance due to the fear of being ridiculed by leadership and their peers for seeking professional help (Thoen et al., 2020). Mental health help-seeking in the organization of law enforcement have been found to be significantly negatively impacted by the stigma that law enforcement officers experience in their agencies (Drew & Martin, 2021).

The mental health diagnosis of law enforcement officers with PTSD has been considered an occupational factor (Frey, 2020) defined as a person exposed to traumatic events. PTSD has occurred after an individual experiences or witnesses an event perceived as a threat in which they experience fear, terror, or helplessness (Frey, 2020). Soomro and Yanos (2019) indicated that officers who identified as having PTSD symptoms held more negative attitudes about recovery and help-seeking. Even though the duty of a law enforcement officer has been to protect and serve, the occupational hazards of being a law enforcement officer have often led to multiple forms of PTSD (Yun & Lee, 2015). A strong mental health has been vital to have as a law enforcement officer but has no levels of limits to the effects of PTSD (Drew & Martin, 2021).

Campion (2001) found that, among 89 surveyed law enforcement agencies, nine agencies reported officer suicides stemming from various mental health issues. These incidents occurred against a backdrop of intense, high-stress, and often traumatic exposure to horrific crime scenes, where officers were required to manage graphic evidence and support grieving families while suppressing their own emotional reactions. Law enforcement officers who have been diagnosed with PTSD have been constantly vigilant of their surroundings in case of any danger of death

(Violanti, 2010). Mental health conditions have caused disruptive effects in shift work and normal sleeping habits and have been linked to depression, fatigue, and other health issues (River-Vasquez, 2014).

According to Violanti et al. (2008), research has shown a link between shift work and suicide risk among law enforcement officers; in addition to female officers have been more likely to have depression or ideas of suicide if they worked the day shift, while their male counterparts had the same issues with afternoons and nights (Violanti et al., 2008). Occurrences of law enforcement officers experiencing mental health issues have resulted in profound consequences for the individual, such as alcohol, drug, or gambling addictions, in addition to various high-risk behaviors and uses of excessive force (Soomro & Yabnos, 2019). Carlson-Johnson et al. (2020) found that law enforcement officers who were highly stressed were more at risk of committing suicide.

Recruitment and Retention

American law enforcement agencies in the 21st century have been exposed to new challenges in retaining officers (Litsey, 2020). The negative public attention has driven many law enforcement officers to resign and has also caused prospective officers to consider other career paths (Arcuri, 2020). According to Maciag (2020), the recruitment and retention of law enforcement officers has been a systemic problem for at least ten years. The problem that existed correlated with low pay, morale benefits, and safety concerns of law enforcement officers (Maciag, 2020). According to Lehman (2020), many agencies struggled to hire new officers, and some saw a decrease in recruitment numbers as high as 25%.

Law enforcement agencies nationwide have faced many issues that included budget cuts, changes in generational values, inadequate compensation packages, fierce competition from

private sectors and federal law enforcement agencies, and an increase in officers leaving early to pursue other careers (Police Executive Research Forum, 2019). Additionally, a study of 654 criminal justice students from two different universities indicated that negative publicity and perceived risks for the profession of law enforcement were discouraging factors from becoming law enforcement officers (Morrow et al., 2019). The use of criminal justice students for recruitment has limited value because 69 % of all agencies only require a high school diploma for their recruits and only 4% require a bachelor's degree (Police Executive Research Forum, 2019).

According to Lentz (2022), throughout the history of American policing, law enforcement agencies have struggled with inadequate recruitment and retention of quality personnel, and during the first half of the 21st century, this inadequacy reached a crisis level. As law enforcement and community relations continued to decline on national levels, along with calls to defund or eliminate law enforcement agencies of major cities in the United States, the recruitment and retention problem grew (Lentz, 2022). Historically, law enforcement agencies were able to identify the root cause of recruitment and retention and in some cases work out their differences (Maciag, 2020) but in the 21st century, recruitment and retention became a challenge due to national ongoing anti-police sentiment (Police Executive Research Forum, 2019).

Turnover rates in addition to a lack of applicants have led to a severe impact on both the officers and the communities in which they serve (Lentz, 2022). To correct recruitment and retention, many law enforcement agencies have drastically changed their recruitment and retention policies to fill their ranks, in addition to recruitment tactics and bonuses that vary depending on the agency and the needs of the agency (Maciag, 2020). For smaller agencies with some flexibilities, the changes have included small pay increases, improved benefits packages,

and additional rewards such as allowing officers to drive their patrol vehicles and motorcycles home (Maciag, 2020).

Larger agencies, however, have taken the same approach in addition to offering higher pay and better benefits to attract and retain quality applicants (Lentz, 2022). The bidding wars placed between law enforcement agencies have hurt smaller agencies that cannot afford to offer similar incentives (Maciag, 2020). In many cases, this also resulted in smaller agencies losing applicants or current officers seeking better pay and additional benefits (Lentz, 2022). In 2018, Deputy Chief Meade of the University of Central Florida Police Department stated that, on a national level, bidding wars, lack of training, and low morale are a few of the key contributors to high turnover rates in agencies (Meade, 2018).

Summary

The literature review focused on key factors related directly and indirectly to understanding the morale of law enforcement officers. To adequately frame the subject of understanding morale in a southern state's law enforcement agency, it was critical to outline the need for additional research to identify potential differences based on the dynamics of a southern state. The theoretical framework used to guide this research was Agnew's general strain theory. As such, the subject of understanding the morale and the perceptions that law enforcement officers have with national ongoing anti-police sentiment were explored in depth by reviewing the literature on morale, the culture of law enforcement, stress in law enforcement, the mental health of law enforcement officers, and recruitment and retention of law enforcement. The contemporary challenges faced by law enforcement officers were highlighted, specifically addressing the adverse effects of anti-police sentiments, occupational stressors, and the imperative for enhanced community safety measures. Earlier research on understanding the

morale of law enforcement officers indicated that improving officers' perceptions lacks simple solutions or quick fixes. Nonetheless, this body of research provided a potential framework to direct discussion, help manage departmental initiatives, and support future research studies.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how national ongoing anti-police sentiment shaped the morale of law enforcement officers in a southern state who did not experience issues of defunding and riots that many areas of the country experienced. The problem addressed was the nationwide decline in the morale of law enforcement officers in the United States (Police Executive Research Forum, 2021). Law enforcement agencies in the United States have been facing unprecedented issues and record levels of issues with morale (Thompson, 2022). Daily stressors were key factors in the decline of the morale of law enforcement officers and national ongoing anti-police sentiment have crippled how law enforcement officers act and react within their communities. This chapter outlined the design of this qualitative case study that was used to collect the data and the method that was used to analyze and evaluate the data. The case study used interview data from law enforcement officers to obtain a realistic perspective of their morale and explored how national ongoing anti-police sentiments have altered their morale.

Research Methodology and Design

The research methodology used was qualitative, and the design used to conduct the research was case study. Qualitative research methodology was instrumental because it asked questions about how an individual makes sense of their experiences and allowed for a detailed and more comprehensive exploration of the distinctive perspective of lived experiences (Willig, 2023). The case study design allowed for a more in-depth knowledge of the participants' experiences and created a multifaceted understanding of complex issues in their real-life context, which was beneficial because the design explained the human experiences (Johnson & Johnson, 2011).

Qualitative research allowed for an active investigation of the lived experiences (McLeod, 2019; Willig, 2023) and, therefore, was better suited because it asks questions about how an individual makes sense of their lived experiences. Brewer and Brewer (2023) used five key traits: utilizing words, prioritizing naturally occurring data, examining the world from the perspective of the subjects, rejecting natural science models of social research, and building-up from data analysis in an inductive relationship between theory and research.

However, of these five key traits, this research method focused on morale through only three of these traits and segments of two traits that included utilizing words, prioritizing naturally occurring data, examining the world from the perspective of the subjects, rejecting natural science models of social research, and building up from data analysis from a thematic analysis approach. The thematic analysis approach, which identified patterns in the data, was used to find themes that were useful in answering the question of morale as it related to ongoing anti-police sentiments in this case study. A qualitative research methodology aims to gather data through open-ended and conversational communications. It examines human experiences. This research utilized a qualitative methodology with a case study design, thereby excluding experimental design, correlational design, historical design, and phenomenology design (Brewer & Miller, 2003).

The case study research design was best suited for this qualitative research of law enforcement officers in a southern state because it captured a range of perspectives related to real-life experiences. The case study approach provided a holistic and in-depth perspective of descriptions and analyses that allowed for the development of detailed views of processes, interactions, and cases (Turner, 2006). This method has been an integral tool in the investigation of social phenomena (Johnson & Johnson, 2011) and assisted in understanding the morale of law

enforcement officers from an individual perspective, an interactive perspective, a cultural perspective, and an institutional perspective. Other research designs that included phenomenological methods, grounded theory, narrative method, discursive method (discourse analysis), ethnography, and critical methods were not used due to the unparalleled ability of the case study research design that allowed the flexibility to collect data through various means, see the relationships between the phenomena, the context and the people, and the ability to capture the lived experiences (Rizo & Levitt, 2021).

The phenomenological design could not be used because the design induced a bias or guide to adopting an attitude towards the inquiry (Doreian & Conti, 2017), in this case, law enforcement officers are predisposed to secrecy and were very selective in whom they trust. The grounded theory method could not be used because it was the inductive creation of a hierarchy of data categories and extended way past the needed saturation level for research (Rizo & Levitt, 2021). In this case, the grounded theory was not appropriate because there were time limits to this research study. A narrative approach would not be feasible since it involved several methodological variations and sometimes entire life stories. This research was based on a particular range of time and did not relate to inquiry into the content of narratives, which could have been extremely time-consuming (Rizo & Levitt, 2021).

The case study research design effectively balanced the identification of expected, predictable event aspects with the capture of additional quantifiable details, which provided both necessary data and a foundation for future research (Johnson & Johnson, 2011). The case study applied to a broad range of theoretical questions and was the only way to rigorously examine an event (Johnson & Johnson, 2011). Additionally, this research design further assisted in gaining concrete, contextual, and in-depth knowledge about a real-world subject. The employed case

study methodology facilitated the elucidation of both foreseen event characteristics and requisite empirical data, thereby providing a robust foundation for prospective investigations on the morale of law enforcement officers.

Population and Sample

The population for this qualitative case study research consisted of active full-time certified law enforcement officers who worked post-George Floyd's death in 2020, within a large county in a southern state of the United States. The eligibility requirements for all law enforcement officers were based on full-time employment, employed for over 5 years, and officers who have been working in patrol (motorcycle, tactical or patrol unit). This county employed 2066 full-time law enforcement officers that could have been included in the initial pool (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020; Bureau of Justice Statistics 2020). According to Williams (2021), the population's demographics consisted of 60.8% White, 29.70% African American, 6.2% Hispanic or Latino American, 2.1% Asian American, .5% Native American or Alaskan Native, .23% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and .2% Two or More Races. The gender distribution within this group of law enforcement officers consisted of 31.69% females and 68.31% males. The educational requirement included a four-year college degree, prior military service, prior police, or corrections experience, beginning as a community service officer and later transitioning to full-time certified law enforcement officers (Williams, 2021).

A formal request was sent to the office of administration to participate in an in-depth case study on understanding the morale of law enforcement officers in a southern state, and permission was granted (see Appendix A). Before soliciting by sending out emails to law enforcement officers, I requested and received IRB approval to ensure all appropriate steps and protocols were in adherence. The PIO was asked to distribute the recruitment email (see

Appendix B) to all law enforcement officers with the contact information, incentives, and purpose of the study. Each law enforcement officer who chose to participate was able to contact the researcher via email, text, or phone call to set up a convenient date and time to conduct the interview. The incentive was a chance to win one of three \$100 gift cards. Additionally, and for the purpose of the incentives, each participant had a number assigned and attached to their names and point of contact. At the end of the research publication, I used Random.org website to select the three random winners who won one of three 100-dollar gift cards. The winning law enforcement officers were called and asked to meet at a mutual place of their choice to collect their gift cards. However, should any winners have selected the same location, separate times would have been assigned for each winner to collect the gift card.

Convenience sampling was useful for this case study in that it was a type of non-probability sampling, and I selected any and all available subjects who met the criteria for inclusion (Powers, 2010) into the research study. The sample was taken from a large county in a southern state within the United States. All of the officers had varied experiences within their department and were able to address their experiences on morale regarding anti-police sentiments and national ongoing anti-police sentiments. The sample size was determined using the guidelines provided by Alder and Alder (2012) in their work on sample size selection. The range of 12 to 60 participants was recommended as suitable for reaching saturation, with an optimum number of 30. Saturation was reached with 30; however, an additional four law enforcement officers were included to confirm that new themes appeared, totaling the sample size at 34 participants.

Selected law enforcement officers received research invitations to participate in the case study; however, should any selected officer have declined, they would have been thanked for

their time, and an alternate qualifying participant would have been chosen from the original pool of emails received. Furthermore, all declining participants would not have been included in the incentive drawing. Additionally, had this level of sampling not provided enough qualifying participants, then a snowball sampling technique would have been used to recruit additional participants who were referred to by their friends, co-workers, or acquaintances that were also law enforcement officers within this county. Snowball sampling has been widely used in qualitative research and has provided additional means of accessing the vulnerable and more impenetrable social groupings (Atkinson et al., 2003). The snowball sampling technique was used and each qualifying law enforcement officer who initiated contact with the researcher was given the opportunity to participate in the case study research until saturation was achieved. A combined non-probability approach was utilized, incorporating six snowball-sampled participants and 28 convenience-sampled participants.

Instrumentation

The interviews were fully structured, and the instrumentation used was face-to-face. Other options that could have been used were remote interviews via Zoom; a telephone call over the phone or a quiet location at a library of the participant's choice. The one-on-one interview format facilitated a comprehensive evaluation of each participant's self-perception regarding their confidence levels, enthusiasm, emotions, and their overall mental and emotional states concerning departmental activities initiated since 2020.

All research questions were opened ended and designed to explore the perception of the participant's morale, how they perceived their peer's morale, the morale within the department, the experiences of working daily post-George Floyd, and their experiences with national ongoing anti-police sentiments. Moreover, there were no time limits that affected or restricted a

participant's responses. These interactions yielded comprehensive data that was instrumental in delineating the scope of morale in a southern state's law enforcement agency. Additionally, appropriate supplementary questions were utilized to gain a more thorough insight into the specific context of situational circumstances while patrolling.

The interview instrument was designed by the researcher, and the language of the interview questions were designed with the intentions of limiting any coerced responses, biases, or expectations. Interview questions 1-15 were created to explore law enforcement officers' perception of their morale prior to and during national ongoing anti-police sentiment. The first question sought to understand the participants' daily lives by asking them to define and value the term morale in their own words. By using each person's own definition of morale, the first question was aimed at uncovering its perceived value and importance in their daily lives. Each interview question was designed to explore and understand perceptions of morale within a southern states' law enforcement agency, examining the variations between pre-and post-2020 periods. The questions specifically focused on several key determinants of morale to include perception of factors that determine morale for self, for peers, for their department, against negative press, scenarios that might alter morale, their community's response to anti-police sentiments, effects of their jobs, and departmental influences on morale. Moreover, these questions sought to understand if national ongoing anti-police sentiment was affecting morale, and if an officer's morale was a major factor in whether a southern state's law enforcement agency improved or declined. The research study was also designed to investigate whether there was a link between public perceptions of law enforcement and an officer's morale.

Prior to requesting IRB approval for the interview instrument, an expert field test was conducted using three law enforcement officers who were not potential participants in this

research. The selected officers were all subject matter experts because of their time as law enforcement officers, their ranks, their levels of expertise, experience, and employment within the same law enforcement agency pre- and post-2020. The three law enforcement officers and all research participants were all employed by the same law enforcement agency. The first law enforcement officer was a captain who had a little over 20 years in law enforcement and began his career in patrol, then advanced to investigator, lieutenant, and then captain. The second law enforcement officer was a lieutenant, who has 26 years in law enforcement and began his career in patrol, then sergeant, and finally a lieutenant. The third law enforcement officer was a sergeant with 25 years of experience in the field. He began his career in patrol, later transitioned to corrections, returned to patrol, and subsequently advanced to the rank of sergeant. He was then transferred to the academy to specialize in training for the new citizens' police program as a liaison.

The initial assessment from the expert panelist required changes that were specific to experiences, perspective, and transparency from the Subject Matter Expert (SME) in the field of law enforcement. Two research questions were revised to better capture a participant's perspective based on their experiences, and the interview was conducted again without any additional modifications. Additionally, the questions were reviewed, assessed, and revised based on the recommendation of the dissertation chair and the Subject Matter Expert. The end draft of each interview question was listed as the interview instrument (see Appendix C). The expert panel review was conducted to establish content validity, ensuring that the tools, timing, data collection method, and research objectives were appropriately aligned.

Study Procedures

A site permission letter was obtained from the executive leader to solicit law enforcement officers from the agency to participate in this research case study (see Appendix A). Once IRB approval was received, I emailed the recruitment letter to the PIO representative for email disbursement to all potential participants with an introduction, purpose of study, eligibility, the incentives, and the researcher's contact information (see Appendix B). Each participant being interviewed was able to contact the researcher via email, text or phone call and I also inquired if they had any additional questions about the research or the research process. I answered all questions about the research, and upon acceptance of participation, scheduled a face-to-face interview with a date, time, and location that was convenient for the participant.

All law enforcement officers chose to conduct interviews in person, and we convened in a neutral environment that was comfortable for each participant. To avoid any risk during the interview sessions, the interviews were conducted in a safe and secure location that ensured the safety and privacy of both the interviewer and the participant. The centralized location for interviews was held at the researcher's private home office location, and each participant was assured that every participant would be treated equally and that all interviews would be conducted with the same script. At the time and scheduled date of the interview, each participant was asked a pre-established series of questions and given as much needed time to accurately assess and answer each question. The participant was advised that additional notes would be taken as well as audio recordings to correctly document any additional statements.

An informed consent form was also provided with the details, purpose, and intentions of the qualitative research case study (see Appendix D). Each participant was advised of any risk that may be involved in the study, as well as the confidentiality of the research. Participants were

also advised as to what would be expected should they determine that they would like to continue with the research process. Furthermore, I answered any additional questions and asked if the participants had any additional concerns about the research process. I then asked for verbal informed consent to proceed with the research process, and once the consent was approved, each participant was asked the list of interview questions. Additionally, each participant was asked to choose an alias name that was used during coding and analysis to avoid any breach of confidentiality and to protect the identity of each participant.

The interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes depending on the responses of the participating law enforcement officer, with the two longest extending to one hour and 13 minutes. I kept an additional half-hour for any delays or questions. Case study research notes were taken by the researcher of all participants, while simultaneously recording the interviews via a Sony ICD-UX570 hand-held audio recorder as well as an audio recording device that was equipped with a transcription audio program to convert the text into a manuscript that was easily readable.

The dual recording was set in place as a backup in the event of failure or audio gaps. Following the interview, the audio data was transposed into the manuscript of the interview where it was proofed and edited accordingly by the researcher. Each participant was given the option to review and edit the transcribed interview via email to ensure accuracy and all participants received the transcribed document and replied without change. Once completed, the manuscript was entered into NVivo for data analysis and would be saved for 3 years. After three years, the paper documents and notes would be shredded and burned. Additionally, all computer data files and recordings would be deleted and destroyed.

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006), thematic analysis method was used as the iterative process to become familiar with the data, generate the codes, categorize, generate the themes, review the themes, define and name the themes, then locate the exemplars. Thematic data analysis was used to identify recurrent, salient, and self-evident points, issues, words, term events, language, and discourse (Stokes, 2011). The analysis consisted of an in-depth review of relationships, patterns, detailed descriptions, and a thorough review of the data collected. I became familiar with the data, generated initial codes, categorized the data, searched for themes, reviewed the themes, defined the themes, and completed the analysis.

Interpretation was made within each interview transcript, and all data was reviewed for any error or misinterpretation. As with all computer programs for analysis such as NVivo, the qualitative data analysis tool was merely an aid for the tedious and error-prone task, so additionally, investigator triangulation was used. The investigator triangulation process included cross-verification and analysis of the data, which were compared, discussed, and reconciled to achieve a collective understanding of codes, category, and themes (Aaronson, 2017). I used investigator triangulation to help enhance the validity and credibility of the case study findings. I used thematic analysis to analyze patterns within the narrative of what each participant stated, how the verbiage was used, and the presence of changes to each question. To mitigate any researcher bias or assumptions, data interpretation was rigorously and transparently annotated, focusing closely on comprehension and personal interpretations. This detailed documentation enhanced traceability throughout the data analysis process to ensure objectivity.

The data was coded by using the NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS) and added into a secured locked briefcase to be further reviewed and analyzed.

Transcribed interviews and data interpretations were viewed closely and with special attention paid to personal or biased interpretations and comprehension, so that assumptions were easier to track throughout the process. Note-taking was essential, useful, and highly recommended to go back and review the research questions to remember what it was and what the participant stated (O'Reilly, 2008), in addition, the stated experiences, patterns, and written verbiage were all potential codes that were relevant to this research.

Assumptions

The first assumption was that law enforcement officers have been relatively uniformed in their thought process and the quality of their morale. However, researchers had recently found that there had been a decline in morale among law enforcement officers (Borysovykh et al., 2020; Eligon, 2020; Jackman, 2022; Leavenworth & Goode, 2020; Lurye, 2020). It was assumed that the law enforcement participants in a southern state would feel secure enough to discuss the matter of their morale and their perceptions of the effect of national ongoing anti-police sentiments without fear of any repercussions. This assumption was critical in that the data would be unreliable should the participants hold back and minimize their beliefs and thoughts. The idea was to have all participants open and candid, therefore, confidentiality and data safety would be protected at all costs.

It was also assumed that all participants would be aware of national ongoing anti-police sentiments due to the participants' access to the news media and social media sites. Therefore, access to news media and social media sites and comments could have an impact on their perceptions of anti-police sentiments. It was also assumed that all participants would answer each question on morale as it related to anti-police sentiments and national ongoing anti-police

sentiments honestly and truthfully. This assumption was critical as it related directly to the validity of this case study research.

Limitations

Limitations were defined as imposed restrictions that were out of the researcher's control (Haynes & Loblay, 2024; Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The first limitation was the researcher's biases. I was a graduate of the Citizens' Police Academy and have many family members that were law enforcement officers, along with friends that were all associated with law enforcement. This exposure could have affected the perception I might have had when working with the participants. To mitigate these biases towards data and findings, I used investigator triangulation in this qualitative research to reduce these biases and improve the credibility of the findings (Barker & Pistrang, 2021; Goncalves & Standing, 2017).

A second limitation in the case study sample of participants in this southern state was the change in leadership. Historically, changes in leadership can have extreme impact on morale (Halstead, 1997). A new executive leader was sworn into office in November of 2022, and a new administrator was sworn into office in 2023. To mitigate and maintain the reliability of the research, I used law enforcement officers who had been in the agency for over 5 years and those who had experienced anti-police sentiment pre- and post-George Floyd. Though it would have been impossible to measure the trustworthiness of any qualitative data (Leung, 2015), by using officers who had worked within the agency for over 5 years, the potential for accuracy and truthfulness of participants on the issues of morale was based on their past experiences and not current events.

A third limitation was a participant's hesitation to discuss experiences and perceptions because of the blue code of silence. The blue code of silence unofficially protects misbehaving

officers from any outside scrutiny or punishment which may include threats of force or danger to oneself (Ivkovic et al., 2018). The researcher's professional role outside of National University requires reporting suspicions of child or elderly abuse, possible harm to self or others, and committed crimes to the appropriate authorities. To mitigate the effects of the blue code of silence, the researcher openly disclosed in the consent letter that I am mandated to reporting any child abuse, abandonment or neglect, elderly abuse, possible harm to self or others, threats to harm or death, and the reporting of committed crimes to the appropriate authority.

Delimitations

Delimitations are specific boundaries that the researcher sets when designing a research study (Coker, 2022). The first delimitation associated with this research was restricting the participants to one law enforcement agency within a county of the United States. This makes it difficult to draw conclusions from a universal perspective. Therefore, this study may not be representative from the perspective of law enforcement officers outside of the region being studied but also outside of the agency.

For this research, I selected a single county in a southern state for my case study due to the time frame of the study, the associated cost with of the study, and the travel expenses to other counties and regions within the state. There could have been different experiences present across various counties and cities within a southern state that was currently unknown. This also ensured that all participants were exposed to the same community pressures, administrative policies, and departmental oversights that influenced law enforcement's morale.

A third delimitation was the researcher's selection of law enforcement officers that have worked with the law enforcement agency for over 5 years. Law enforcement officers were selected based on their years in the agency, ensuring that their insight and perspectives were

grounded in practical knowledge and expertise. By focusing on the experiences of each participant, the research aimed to gather insight from participants who had firsthand experiences of anti-police sentiments pre-and post- George Floyd incident.

Ethical Assurances

Prior to the commencement of data collection, this research study received full approval from National University's IRB (see Appendix E), alongside written permission from the agency administrator to engage with law enforcement officers (see Appendix A). All interview protocols were IRB-approved. Participants were fully briefed on the research purpose, procedures, and expectations, and I verified that everyone demonstrated a clear understanding of the research study process.

Ethical principles and institutional guidelines guided all facets of this research. This research was guided by a commitment to rigorous ethical considerations and principles, ensuring full adherence to protocol, including informed consent and the absolute protection of participants confidentiality and data security. A thorough review of the risk of harm was conducted, potential conflicts of interest were considered, and a clear plan of action was established to address and communicate any ethical issues proactively. The department and leadership of the department remained nameless, and all identifying information that was used in the interview was eliminated as thoroughly as possible while maintaining the integrity of the given data. The study participants' identities were concealed using referred alias, codename, or sobriquet names to protect their identity.

For a period of 3 years, all audio-recordings from in person face-to-face interviews would be stored on a secured encrypted digital device under lock and key and in my personal home office. Additionally, and during every step of this research process, recorders, paper notes, and

personal laptop computer containing research data were transported from various interview locations in a safely secured and locked briefcase.

As a researcher involved in the daily operations of law enforcement, the selected population for this case study was convenient due to my indirect work experience within the law enforcement agency, connections to family and friends within the department, and participation as an alumnus of The Citizen's Police Academy (TCPA). This program included a 12-week session that highlighted major divisions and sections within the organization, as well as multiple police ride-alongs across different zones. This involvement raised concerns about both intentional and unintentional bias, as I have interacted directly and indirectly with numerous law enforcement officers within this agency and observed anti-police sentiment during ride-alongs.

However, snowball sampling was employed, resulting in the recruitment of only six participants. Research bias was reduced by utilizing demographic diversity and employing independent chains along with reverse snowballing, which allowed participants to share information about the study with potential contacts instead of disclosing their private contacts directly to the researcher. This ensured ethical, voluntary, and diverse recruitment. To prevent any biases from influencing this study and affecting the results of any research questions, I did not direct the participant's thought process to recall any known events during these ride-along or examples of anti-police sentiments mentioned during alumni events. I did not mention any past conversations made during any ride-along, therefore, leaving each participant to choose what event they would like to disclose. This reach study investigated how the existing anti-police sentiment across the United States, particularly in a southern state, shaped law enforcement officers' perceptions of morale.

Summary

This qualitative case study was designed to explore the individual experiences of law enforcement officers within a southern state's law enforcement agency and geared to understanding how national ongoing anti-police sentiments shaped the morale of law enforcement officers. The interview questions were framed around the participants' perception of what morale was like post-George Floyd and with ongoing national ongoing anti-police sentiment. To ensure consistency across the qualitative case study, a uniform set of interview questions was administered to all participants. A fully structured interview instrument was used to interview 34 law enforcement officers. The participants were interviewed face-to-face at various locations, including a private office, conference rooms, and residence. Strict data confidentiality and secure, compliant handling of all documents were paramount throughout the research study. Qualitative data analysis was performed using NVivo, applying a thematic analysis approach. Furthermore, all methodological assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and ethical assurances were strictly adhered to.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how national ongoing anti-police sentiment shaped the morale of law enforcement officers in a southern state law enforcement agency that did not experience issues of defunding and riots that many areas of the country experienced. The problem addressed was the nationwide decline in the morale of law enforcement officers in the United States (Police Executive Research Forum, 2021). This chapter detailed the qualitative results I collected from law enforcement officers currently employed by a law enforcement agency in a southern state. The results detailed interpretations and insights into their perceptions of morale based on their experiences of anti-police sentiments, the overall morale within their agency with national ongoing anti-police sentiment, and their fears associated with the continued need for immediate transparency without having all the facts of each case thoroughly investigated.

This chapter began with an investigation into the trustworthiness of the data and how the results can further lead to research about understanding the morale of law enforcement officers in times of national ongoing anti-police sentiments. Following that, I identified key words, codes, categories, and themes from the interview data. Finally, the chapter concluded with a brief consideration of how the results from this research have related to previous research about the morale of law enforcement officers coupled with anti-police sentiments.

Trustworthiness of the Data

The trustworthiness of the data referred to the degree of confidence the reader can have in the accuracy and reliability of the research data (Powers, 2010). Though it would be impossible to have an exact measurement of the trustworthiness of qualitative data (Leung, 2015), establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability established and ensured

trustworthiness in the given data. In this section, I will discuss each of the four attributes of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

According to O'Leary (2007), credibility has been defined as the ability of a research process to generate findings that can elicit belief and trust. To achieve credibility, this research had a sample population that represented dissimilar genders, races, ages, and years of service. There were eight females and 26 males with an age range from 20-70 and a mean of 45. Participants ranged in experience from 5 years to 25 + years in the profession.

According to Ahmed (2024), to achieve credibility, the interview questions' findings must answer the research questions, and the results must be replicable should another researcher choose to complete the same study. Therefore, credibility was achieved by using expert field testing using three law enforcement officers who worked for the same law enforcement agency who were not participants in this research. Additionally, I used investigator triangulation that created allowances for different perspectives, which helped minimize any biases through cross-checking. To further strengthen this research, each participant was offered the opportunity to review, correct, or update the interview data through the member checking process. The member checking process allowed the verification for accuracy and confirmed that the findings correctly reflected their experiences and perspectives.

Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research has been defined as the ability to apply the research findings to other relevant context and settings (Rockett et al., 2014). To ensure transferability of this qualitative research, a full description of the settings, required participants, methodology, population and sample, study procedures, and data analysis was given in Chapter 3 to potentially

allow any secondary researchers the ability to apply lessons learned from one study to another research site (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All phases of this qualitative case study were conducted with transparency and clearly outlined, in addition to the assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and ethical assurances that were considered during the research process.

To ensure transferability in this research, all stages of this research were conducted with transparency. I used thick description, to allow readers to assess the relevance and applicability of the findings to their own site. Additionally, thick description was also used to understand the unique features of the study, and provided a detailed account of the research context, participants, and setting, while also using direct quotes to convey thoughts, perspectives, and interpretations of the research questions. The participants were all certified law enforcement officers and were selected through the recruiting process.

Interviews were conducted in person following the informed consent letter (see Appendix D) and the open-ended questions (see Appendix C). Additionally, all interviews were completed in an undisclosed location outside of the officer's place of employment to further preserve confidentiality. All 34 interviews were conducted via face-to-face in-person interviews, which made it easy to gain, establish, and develop a rapport with each law enforcement officer.

Dependability

According to Rockett et al. (2014), dependability in qualitative research has been defined as the reliability and consistency of the research process that has allowed another researcher to conduct the same study under similar circumstances to obtain similar findings. Dependability would be achieved when the researcher has confirmed that the research process is traceable, logical, and clearly documented (Nowell et al., 2017). To ensure dependability and adherence to best practices for this research, I documented all research decisions, methods, processes, data

collection strategies, and analytic procedures, allowing for verification and replication by others. Additionally, steps like triangularization, maintaining records for auditing trials, peer review, and member checking were completed and documented to further enhance the trustworthiness, transparency, and traceability of the research process.

I conducted this study using the following methods: law enforcement officers were recruited via email request from the law enforcement agency's PIO. All qualified participating law enforcement officers who could provide valuable insight into understanding morale within the agency responded back to the researcher via email or by calling in to schedule a time to answer the interview questions. All law enforcement officers conducted their interviews in a centralized location via face-to-face interview, but before beginning each individual interview, each participating law enforcement officer was given the same consent letter (see Appendix D), which they read, indicated that they had a clear understanding of the document, and gave verbal consent.

Each participant was reminded of their rights to withdraw at any time during the research process and the risk associated with their participation in the study. The study's risk encompassed the potential disclosure of the agency and that readers may discover their personal identity, although I took all precautionary measures to mitigate this risk from happening. After the preliminary session, the interview began, and participants were then subjected to one interview instrument comprised of a series of open-ended questions and given ample time to answer each question.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree in which the findings were considered objective and were not influenced by the researcher's biases (Powers, 2010). Confirmability for this research

was also established when credibility, transferability, and dependability were all attained, and the subsequent results of the data were void of the researcher's interpretations and biases (Powers, 2010). According to Nowell et al. (2017), confirmability was determined when the researcher demonstrated how conclusions and interpretations were reached. To avoid potential biases, the recruitment method was designed to maximize inclusivity and avoid bias by targeting a wide range of possible participants. For this research study, I prioritized data that directly captured each participant's lived experiences. In addition, the qualitative research methodology was focused on obtaining data through open-ended questions, conversational communications, and clarifications of the data received. The recruitment method ensured the possibility of a wide range of potential law enforcement officers within the agency.

Results

This qualitative research study was intended to gain a deeper understanding of how law enforcement officers perceive morale with national ongoing anti-police sentiments. This section contained results of the data analysis related to the research question and the demographic data profiles of the sample used for this qualitative case study. Additionally, this section also addressed the gaps in literature related directly to morale with national ongoing anti-police sentiment and the perceived impact on law enforcement officers. The following is a detailed summary of the findings of the study. Following the recruiting email sent out by the PIO to facilitate the request for participants. All 34 individuals responded to the researcher via phone call or by email to participate in the research case study. The study focused on a specific targeted sample of 30 active patrolling law enforcement officers within a single agency who met two key criteria: having over 5 years of service and having actively served post-George Floyd in 2020.

The sampling saturation was achieved at 30, but I continued to sample four more law enforcement officers to ensure no new thematic insights were present. Of the 34 law enforcement officers, 26 (76.5%) were males, and eight (23.5%) were females, which was a slightly higher percentage of males to females consistent to the ratio of males to females within the agency of 86.7% male to 13.3% female (Duffin, 2022). After receiving verbal consent, the research process began with each law enforcement officer selecting a sobriquet that was used to identify and address the officer during the interview process.

Each officer took a few minutes to think of a name that was best suited for them based on their personality, their favorite Disney character, their favorite superhero, their alias nicknames they would have liked, and the names of someone they admired. All participants chose sobriquet names that bore no relevance to their genders, their race, their socioeconomic status, their religion, nor their positions or sectors as a patrolling law enforcement officer. Furthermore, no participating law enforcement officer selected or had the same name as other participating officer in research study.

The interview process began by asking each participant to define the word morale. The question of defining the word morale was to identify if each participant had a clear understanding of the meaning of the word, ideally, only three out of 34 participants took the time out to review the definition via their phones and Google search for clarification. All 34 participating law enforcement officers were asked the same open-ended interview questions (see Appendix C) about their perceptions on their morale with national ongoing anti-police sentiments.

Law enforcement officers were asked a series of questions relating directly to their perceptions and experiences of their morale at the beginning of anti-police sentiment which

began in 2014 with the killing of Michael Brown, during anti-police sentiment in 2014 through 2020, and with national ongoing anti-police sentiment from 2020 to 2025. Additional questions included were related to morale and negative press, negative community events, the differences in the public on the days when anything was mentioned negatively about law enforcement officers in the news media, when events were seen on body camera, and the issues of transparency.

These interviews occurred between May 16, 2025, and July 5, 2025, and all participating law enforcement officers were asked the interview questions in the same order with only two male law enforcement officers having skipped one question and then returned to answer the question, to complete their interview. The interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes depending on the responses of the participating law enforcement officer, with the two longest extending to one hour and 13 minutes. Each interview was then transcribed by use of the Otter.ai software then sent encrypted via personal email for member checking to each participant by use of their chosen sobriquet names. During the member checking process of the research, each participant verified that the collected data accurately reflected their experiences, thoughts, and perspectives, which additionally ensured credibility and trustworthiness of the research results.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method was conducted concurrently using the qualitative data analytical software tool NVivo and manual methods. All transcripts were imported into the program with demographic categorization by gender (see Table 1), stripped of identifying information, assigned and utilized the chosen sobriquet names (see Table 2) that were selected by each participant, and coded. Additionally, I used manual coding that involved the hand-labeling of the qualitative data. Color-coding was used within the printed interview scripts to organize and categorize information, identify patterns, develop codes, re-categorize, and

assign themes. Furthermore, investigator triangulation was utilized, and the raw data was sent to the investigator, who separately coded, categorized, and themed the data, and only the similar themes were reported. The scripts were read repeatedly, and keywords, phrases, and specific sections were highlighted according to their corresponding codes. NVivo was then used to create a word cloud (see Figure 1) that included 100 of the most frequent words from the research data to code and identify likely categories. Recurring words and phrases captured the core idea to summarize the data, then words were grouped into codes that were then categorized based on their shared meanings. I first identified words that were placed into basic codes that aligned to the interview questions. Words such as *cooperation*, *assistance*, and *help* were listed under the code of community support and then categorized into support system. Additional codes were listed into categories to form overarching themes with main patterns of meaning to answer the research question. Overarching trends were coded in NVivo to include a good support system, public pressures, and unfairness, all of which related to factors influencing morale and morale boosters. The influence of morale was a continuous, long-term factor that either positively or negatively affects a person's overall attitude. A morale booster, on the other hand, was specific, often temporary action or event designed to provide an immediate, positive lift to spirits, bringing together three themes related to RQ1. After various stop words such as (subsectors, organizational acronym, and mindset) were input into NVivo, including filler terms such as “*like*,” “*uh*,” and “*hmmm*,” which were less significant words for analysis, Table 3 was generated to represent the 24 most often utilized words within the research data. A set of correlations between words was established, and the most frequent words used included *leadership*, *attitude*, *body cam*, *trust*, *supervisor*, and *positive*.

Table 2*Participant Sobriquet and Data*

Sobriquet	Years of Service	Age Range	Race
Bruce Wayne	5-10	31-40	B
Batman	20-25	41-50	B
Greg Coleman	5-10	41-50	C
Greg	5-10	41-50	C
Marie	15-20	31-40	O
Bill	15-20	31-40	C
Evangel	5-10	31-40	H
Robocop	20-20	61-70	B
Cameron	15-20	31-40	C
Sandra Brown	5-10	31-40	B
Princess	5-10	31-40	A
Sonic	5-10	31-40	B
Jay	5-10	41-50	B
Johnny Utah	26-30	41-50	C
Ron Swanson	15-20	31-40	C
Nathaniel	5-10	41-50	C
Torres	11-15	41-50	C
Toni Montana	5-10	51-60	B
Wonder Woman	5-10	31-40	C
Space cowboy	11-15	31-40	C
Nolan	5-10	20-30	C
Condor	11-15	51-60	H
Letti	20-25	51-60	C
El Viejo	25-30	61-70	H
Cory Adams	16-20	41-50	O
James David	5-10	41-50	C
Rickie Martin	26-30	61-70	C
Steven	5-10	20-30	C
Ballerina	20-25	31-40	C
Sophia Jones	5-10	31-40	C
Princess Jasmine	5-10	31-40	B
Sam	11-15	41-50	B
Joe	16-20	41-50	C
Lat	25-30	61-70	B

Note. This table indicates each participant's sobriquet names, ranges in years of service, ranges in date of birth, and race.

Table 3*Word Frequency*

Word	Count	Weighted Percentage
Leadership	296	0.63
Attitude	271	0.58
Bodycam	262	0.56
Trust	253	0.54
Supervisor	236	0.50
Positive	227	0.48
Media	212	0.45
Respect	197	0.42
Hours	191	0.41
Support	189	0.40
Mandate	171	0.36
Transparency	162	0.35
Family	157	0.33
Community	145	0.31
Floyd	136	0.29
Politics	113	0.24
Changes	111	0.24
Overload	102	0.22
Perceptions	101	0.22
Protest	93	0.20
Communication	91	0.19
Uniform	89	0.19
Accountability	88	0.19
Mistrust	87	0.19
Total	3980	

Note. This table indicates the word frequency associated with RQ#1.

Research Question 1: How do law enforcement officers perceive their morale during national ongoing anti-police sentiments?

In answering RQ1, inductive coding was used to develop codes directly from the raw data and thematic analysis helped to identify the emerging concepts of all participants' beliefs, thought processes, and perceptions on their morale. The codes listed were supervisor help, peer support, community support, leadership support, repetitive training, excessive force and lethal

force, public scrutiny, media challenges, and immediate transparency. The categories developed were support system, public pressures, and unfairness, which all supported the influences of morale and morale booster. Under the category of support system, I listed the codes of supervisor help, peer support, community support, and leadership support. Under the category of public pressures, I listed the codes of repetitive training, excessive force, and lethal force, and finally, under the category of unfairness, I listed the codes of public scrutiny, media challenges, and immediate transparency. Moreover, during the interview process, officers used the terms ‘excessive force’ and ‘lethal force’ without differentiation to assess the understanding of the negative influence of morale. The above listed codes and categories helped to develop the structure of three themes: Theme 1 captured how an officer perceived having a reliable support system helped sustain morale through emotional encouragement and shared coping strategies. Theme 2 pertained to how the officers perceived that ongoing public criticism and anti-police sentiment have lowered morale. Theme 3 identified how officers experience declining morale as they balance the emotional toll of daily duties with the added strain of public distrust and national ongoing anti-police sentiment while striving to uphold their oath to protect and serve.

Theme 1. Having a reliable support system helped officers sustain morale through emotional encouragement and shared coping strategies. The first theme became apparent when all 34 law enforcement officers discussed the importance of having a good support system within the agency. According to the word cloud (see Figure 1), words such as *leadership*, *support*, *help*, *rewarding*, *fairness*, and *teams* were all essential words used to indicate the positivity related to their support system. The related codes associated with the development of Theme 1 were supervisor help, peer support, community support, and leadership support, which were all related to positive influences on morale and morale boosters. These codes were aligned

under the category of having a good support system. Law enforcement officers believed that having a good support system was critical in the face of anti-police sentiment because it helped to mitigate the detrimental effects on their mental and physical well-being, in addition to the daily stress of their jobs.

The code, supervisor help, was apparent when officers spoke of the support they had from their immediate supervisor. There were 23 out of 34 law enforcement officers who emphasized from their perspective and based on their experiences that an immediate supervisor was one of the key determining factors for positive morale within their patrol zones. Officers disclosed that receiving a supervisor's help and guidance was critical to a law enforcement officer's morale, job satisfaction, and performance. All 23 law enforcement officers also indicated that their supervisor's help, guidance, and directions during incidents while on patrol were crucial in cases involving the public's request for a supervisor to be present, especially during a traffic stop. Officer Greg Coleman, who had 6 years of service, stated:

My immediate supervisor knows and supports me when I'm on duty and when I need back-up. He's always there to help and supports my decisions. I remember a time when I was out on a call by myself because we were short-staffed and I had to call for back-up, and he was the only one in the office. He dropped whatever he was doing and told me he was on his way, and in no time, he showed up and was directing traffic, so the process would go smoother and without any further problems or issues with traffic. I would have been stuck on that call for hours, but he came over and gave me a helping hand and didn't leave until the next shift showed up.

Officer Sonic echoed the same sentiments when he described that his immediate supervisor had always collaborated with his accounts while on scene and supported his decisions. Officer Bill

expressed how thankful he was for his supportive supervisors, who consistently advocated for him. Officer Jonathan remembered a time when he placed a distress call and stated, “I was so panicked that you could hear it in my voice.” He described feeling immense relief when his supervisor arrived and provided critical support. Officer Letti highlighted the significance of her immediate supervisor and explained, “I had some personal stuff going on and my immediate supervisor had my back, not only with my daily calls, but supported me through my tough times.” Officer Lat, who had 27 years of service, mentioned that his supervisor consistently provided support and ensured he had the necessary resources.

Officer Nolan, who had 10 years of service, further explained that immediate supervisors encourage and provide positive words to help their officers. Officer Condor cited, “I couldn’t ask for a better support system. My supervisor makes sure to brief us about any and everything for that day at work.” Officer Wonder Woman further discussed that immediate supervisors played critical roles in their success as officers and additionally stated, “That’s one of the only reasons why I’ve stuck around for this long.” Officer Sandra Brown, who had 9 years of service, explained:

Based on my experiences as an officer, your immediate supervisor determines your morale in law enforcement. If you don’t have the support from an immediate supervisor, then your job gets harder. Whether I need back-up, time off, or at times, someone to defend the decisions I made at a crime scene or during a call, my first line of defense and protection has been my immediate supervisor. I had a difficult case that I won’t mention, but he came on this call with me, and it was like he was just my partner rather than my supervisor. He didn’t take control of this horrible incident but instead made things so

much easier for me, and even started the necessary paperwork when other agencies were called in.

Officer Robocop, who had 25 years of service, conveyed his thoughts and feelings when he stated:

I have seen changes in five [administrator] in my lifetime, and I am close to retirement. Although there have been changes in leadership and changes in protocols, my immediate supervisor continues to offer support and boost my morale, especially when situational circumstance occurs during dispatched calls and complaints, where my bodycam must be reviewed. One day, my immediate supervisor had to go to bat for me, since he was the one that truly knew about the work that I do. I can't remember how many situations happened throughout my years that I've had the backing of my immediate supervisor, and whenever the LT would question him about what happened, he always would come back with, "I've worked with this guy for too long and I know that he would not say something like that or do something like that."

During conversations about instances of supervisor support, Officer El Viejo referred to an incident where his supervisor assisted him during a call, although he did not elaborate beyond indicating that he required back up. Officer Princess on the other hand, provided detailed account of an incident and stated:

I remember there was a time that I was on a domestic violence call, and my supervisor was my back up because we were short staffed that night. This couple was getting really loud and wouldn't listen to anything we had to say. They both wanted to continue fighting with each other and had already gotten physical, but neither one wanted to take the responsibility for the first hit, so we had to arrest them both. I was still new to that

zone at the time, and my supervisor took the time to help me with the reports and even transported the gentleman down to the jail. I was a bit flustered, and my adrenaline was pumping, and he took the time to just talk to me and process the situation. I will never forget that because that was actually my first domestic violence call.

These statements highlighted the officer's assurance in their supervisory bonds and the positive reinforcements from their immediate supervisors. The officers' remarks consistently conveyed a feeling of trust and backing from their immediate supervisors and an overall strong positive perception of their relationships. These statements have also indicated that positive supervisory support has led to good morale and overall better cohesion.

The code listed as peer support was identified when 27 out of 34 law enforcement officers credited co-worker support for improving morale and tolerability. Officers discussed that peer support and strong social connections among law enforcement officers served as the foundational elements for both formal and informal support network within the agency. This sharing of job-related knowledge, emotional and tangible support during personal and professional crisis, along with the authentic bonds that were developed in the carrying out of enforcement of the law, were critical support systems when managing the high stress and scrutiny as an officer. Officers Space Cowboy, James David, Toni Montana, Ron Swanson, and Lat all spoke about the unbreakable bond between co-workers and partners during patrolling hours and beyond. Officers recounted specific instances of strong team cohesion and mutual support during patrols, noting that morale was high when colleagues provided immediate assistance during emergency calls and follow-up paperwork. Officer Marie, who has 16 years of service, explained:

Without having proper back-up and support during emergency calls and urgent dispatched calls, like domestic violence calls, or calls where shots have been fired, many

officers would lose their lives. I have been on a few calls where I only had my partner to depend on. I remember, there was a time when we were on a domestic call, and my partner made sure he coordinated with me because the homeowner had a gun. We were both a bit unedged because we had no visual of the suspect and when we drove up the house was quiet. It was late at night, so that made it even worse. There have been countless times when I moved from one sub-sector to another to help out other co-workers because certain situations can turn for the worst really quick. They are not only my co-workers, but some of them have become really great friends outside of work. I couldn't ask for a better group of people.

Officer Letti, who had 22 years of service, emphasized that the support system among colleagues extended beyond professional duties into personal life. She articulated how having a reliable sounding board and an attentive ear helped in navigating issues outside of the job. Officer Bruce Wayne added:

From the perspective of us as law enforcement officers, support and back-up from co-workers goes way beyond the patrolling environment to our personal lives. As far as I am concerned, that increases my morale from a social and private perspective as well. I honestly don't know what I would do if I didn't have the support of my co-workers. A lot of times, people forget that we are human too. Many of us struggle with family problems, boyfriend and girlfriend issues, problems with kids, death in our families or close friends. I know my co-workers have made life a lot easier for me to live it and love it. I am thankful every day for the friendships I've developed since I became an officer.

Law enforcement officers indicated a strong workplace cohesion, observing that their co-workers enriched their lives professionally and personally, and that their families had socialized outside

of work hours. Officer Princess, who had 10 years of service, spoke of the friends and extended family she has gained since the beginning of her career and stated, “without their support, my morale would be really low. I wouldn’t even have stayed with this job, but with their added support, I am good to go.” Officer Toni Montana further explained from his perspective when he stated:

Some of my co-workers are not only my brothers and my family; they’re my lifeline.

After George Floyd’s death and there was a small riot, they were the ones that had my back. I was called in and had to wear riot gear. I know we were trained for events like these, but I couldn’t even imagine it happening here as well. It was like a movie nightmare, or something seen on social media. Without those guys and gals now, it would not have been the same. I knew they all had my back. I am just happy we are all here to talk about it and that a lot of people didn’t get hurt.

Participants’ responses indicated that peer support has been critical to boosting morale. Law enforcement officers reasoned that support from co-workers has been essential for morale, seeing that it has been a fundamental lifeline. This statement consistently reflected that the value of peer support in boosting morale cannot be overstated and expressed a strong belief of partnership, value, trust, and cohesiveness in their day-to-day interactions.

The code listed as community support was identified when 29 out of 34 law enforcement officers discussed that morale was high when they felt appreciated in their communities. They referred to the direct and tangible support that they received from citizens and local organizations. Law enforcement officers believed that partnering with community, offering support, and getting extra help, would lead to solving local crimes and catching offenders, emphasizing a collaborative, problem-solving approach. Officers Batman, Marie, Bill, Johnny

Utah, Ron Swanson, Torres, Letti, Ballerina, Robocop, and Sonic all spoke of the “good old days” when the community uniformly rallied behind and championed their public safety mission.

Officer Robocop, who has 25 years of service, shared:

I remember when the whole community had the greatest respect for the uniform I was wearing; that old cliché, when my word was my bond. I used to wear this uniform with great pride. Anytime we stopped a car or went to a call, people would treat us like we were in charge and there was no talking back or disrespect. The community wanted to help and continue to help us in certain areas when looking for a suspect. Some of them even provided us with information to solve a case. There are particular areas of town, however, where we get the full support of the community and that makes me feel real good. In these areas, they sometimes pay for our lunches or dinners. As we go up to pay for our food, the owner or waiter tells us that someone has already covered it for you.

These areas that we get full support of the community; we are truly grateful.

Officer Joe, who had 18 years of service, highlighted his experience across several city zones, noting that residents deeply value the reassurance of having accessible law enforcement during crises. Officer Joe stated, “They are the ones that are willing to partner with us and help along the way.” Officer Jay, who had 6 years of service, further explained, “I have been here a short time and have worked in only one area. I am thankful that this area supports me as an officer, and I am also happy that I get to go home to my family at the end of my shift.”

Officer Sonic, who had 9 years of service, discussed his appreciation for his community when he stated:

I am military reservist, so I try my best to meet people in my community where they are and explain situations if needed. I’ve had great support from my community despite all

this anti-police sentiment. I am grateful to say that I use things that happen in the news media and social media to explain to the people in my community that this is not something that we do here in this agency. The majority of the people I deal with in the public are grateful to see an officer around. Even if I make a stop outside of my community when driving home, people tend to say hello or tell me to be safe. I remember one day when I was driving home, and this man flagged me down to help him. I had no problem helping him change his tire, and with my patrol car, making it visible that he didn't get hit on the side of the road. He was so thankful and asked me if I needed anything. I politely declined and told him that helping was a part of my job.

Officer Marie, who had 16 years of service, discussed the tangible support received from citizens within her community when she explained:

Despite a few negative statements, negative reactions, and resistance from the public and citizens within the patrolling communities, the majority of the communities I've served since the beginning of anti-police sentiments have been grateful to see us around. Kids still come up to me and ask questions, and I'm always willing to explain certain situations when asked. There are times that people in the community have supported us by buying us lunches or coffee. Many have said "thank you" or have placed a kind note on my vehicle. The fact that we now have immediate transparency for the public to understand that not everyone wearing a uniform has bad intentions should give notice that we are trying to do our best.

Officer Greg Coleman, who had 6 years of service, further elaborated, "Transparency is the core and being truthful and honest is the key to regaining trust and support within the communities."

Officer Wonder Woman added, "Thank goodness the community I work with gives me all the

support I need.” Law enforcement officers indicated that information sharing, crime reporting, and intelligence gathering fostered stronger zone-based collaboration.

These statements reflected the importance of community support and having positive influences on the morale of law enforcement officers. These statements have also demonstrated the importance of effective policing and relationship-building. Overall, law enforcement officers offered insight into the reasons why positive community support from every stakeholder in their community was critical in fostering practical and professional unified efforts within their agency.

The code identified as leadership support was noted when all 34 law enforcement officers reported that the recent appointments of both the executive leadership and the new political leadership were perceived to have a positive impact on morale. Officers indicated that this new leadership has triggered a range of positive outcomes that have benefited individuals as well as the agency’s internal functions and the community in which they serve. All participating officers discussed positive changes and received the additional support needed to do their jobs.

According to Officer Cory Adams, who had 16 years of service, “With the support of the new [administrator], I feel better getting out there to do my job. He makes me feel like he cares, and if you do the right thing, he has your back. Officer Batman expressed that the change in leadership has been beneficial, and Officer Greg Coleman added that the new [administrator] cares for his officers. All participants noted that both the executive leadership and political leadership have shifted the agency’s internal culture and improved job satisfaction.

Officer Cameron, Princess, and Torres all discussed a sense of improved morale within the agency, noting that it has been a significant duration since the rise of anti-police sentiment, and they felt more supported in their roles. Officer Bill, who had 19 years of service, noted that he perceived the new [administrator] as being present and engaged with his officers. Officer Marie,

who had 16 years of service, echoed the same sentiments when she stated. “I feel like this new [administrator] does a great job when he engages with the officers, and that’s a good thing.”

Officer Johnny Utah additionally noted a positive shift when he stated, “While the [administrator] was on site, he came up and asked me if there was anything he could do to assist. I have never been asked that by a [administrator].”

Officer Letti, who had 22 years of service, noted that there was one individual who interacted with them and has positively impacted the situation. Officer Sophia Jones, who had 5 years of service, noted that she felt validated when she stated:

This new [administrator] and executive administrator have made quite a few changes for the good of us officers. I wish they were here a long time ago, but I guess now is better than never. I have seen time after time again where senior leadership stay in their office, but this new [administrator] gets out there with us and ask questions to find out what our needs are. I have also seen a positive change in my zone and in other officers since he took office. He makes himself visible and with the support of the new mayor, works hard at getting additional equipment, and has even made changes to our uniform. I think I will do my full 20 years and retire if it stays like this. Overall, I am really happy that he takes the time out to make sure we are updated with new technology. I was recently part of one of his community walks and saw residents in my community reaching out to him as a good sign of hope for change. So as far as I am concerned, my morale is good.

During the conversations about improvement and positive shifts within the agency, Officer Torres noted that the new [administrator] had emphasized proactive media engagement to provide the public with accurate information regarding cases that are being worked. Officer Jay, who had 6 years of service, echoed the sentiments of transparency, when he explained,

“Transparency has been a good thing because I have been out there in the community since I became a police officer to do the right thing. I want to continue my career as an officer and see how far I can go up the ladder.” Officer Bill, who had 19 years of service, noted that the leadership of the new [administrator] had emphasized the importance of vigilance and proactively addressed negative media coverage through immediate transparency, which has benefited law enforcement. Officer Lat, who had 27 years of service, expressed a strong viewpoint regarding the shift in leadership when he stated:

This new [administrator] means business and will go above and beyond to support and protect his officers, but keep in mind now, if you do wrong, he will also make sure you are accountable for your wrong doings. I recall the new [administrator] saying that he wants to be open, honest, and transparent to make this area as safe and secure as possible. I believe that we finally have someone who wants to fully support his officers. I remember when anti-police sentiment started and all the negatives that were implied. I remember what happened with the death of George Floyd and it seems like all officers were being held accountable for a few bad seeds. This new [administrator] and elected political official have done nothing more than support the people that protect others within this community. Even though I will be retiring soon, I hope to continue to see good things and for our officer to get all the support they need.

Officer Sandra Brown added, “I am excited to see what this new [administrator] does for his people.” Officer Ron Swanson reported that the new [administrator] has been commending outstanding performance, specifically highlighting two officers whose exceptional service was rewarded with new patrol vehicles and awards. Officer Ron Swanson stated, “I just hope this positive trend continues.”

Officer Marie also mentioned the change in the agency's budget and stated, "The new [administrator] has even budgeted with the mayor for additional staffing, restarted the neighborhood walks to address the community's needs, prioritized prosecuting violent crimes, and has leveraged new technology to improve an officer's capabilities and safety." Officer Bruce Wayne mentioned that the new [administrator] endorsed training and has funded recruit training for non-certified officers. Officer Bruce Wayne further stated, "

The new [administrator] even encourages us to become leaders in our respective field." These statements indicated an improvement in morale attributed to the newly elected executive and political leadership within this southern state law enforcement agency. Officers believed that the newly elected executive and political leadership have brought about a favorable change in the agency, and they felt acknowledged and supported. The feedback proved to be a significant morale booster and positively influenced the atmosphere within this law enforcement agency.

Overall, these four interconnected levels of support highlighted the significance of having a positive support system within the agency. All four levels of support recognized morale by acknowledging each participant's experiences, contributions, and value within this agency. A multifaceted support system that included supervisor's support, peer support, community support, and leadership support that effectively enhanced law enforcement officer's morale and addressed their unique challenges.

Theme 2. Officers perceived that national ongoing anti-police sentiment and public criticism lowered morale by creating feelings of frustration, diminished public support, and reduced professional pride, particularly as they faced repetitive training and scrutiny over excessive and lethal force amid calls for police reform and accountability. The second theme emerged when 30 out of 34 law enforcement officers discussed the negative morale felt due to

the public pressures associated with national ongoing anti-police sentiments. According to the word cloud (see Figure 1), words, such as *investigations*, *duty*, *complaints*, *mistrust*, and *assumptions*, were all vital components perceived by law enforcement officers as the negative cultural environment they must operate within. The related codes associated with the development of Theme 2 were repetitive training and excessive and lethal force, both of which were used interchangeably by officers, and associated with the idea of public pressures for police reform and accountability nationwide. The category developed and used to create this theme was public pressures related to the negative influences of morale.

The code identified as repetitive training emerged from officers' sentiments about the necessity of repeatedly engaging in training they had already completed, either as required training or annual in-service training, particularly following negative incidents or significant events that involved misconduct by other officers outside the agency. Officers noted that police training reform had transitioned from focusing primarily on tactical skills to encompassing areas such as de-escalation and crisis intervention. There was a consensus among officers that they should not face consequences due to the misconduct of their peers. Additionally, law enforcement officers expressed a decline in morale regarding the ongoing mandatory in-service training and ongoing training for several critical reasons. These reasons included the need to adapt to evolving laws and procedures, continuous practice and refinement abilities with firearms, defensive tactics, enhancement of safety skills, building community trust, diversity, and inclusion, and especially use of force.

All 34 law enforcement officers expressed the view that politics, the news media, and public pressures had required them to undergo unnecessary repetitive training, particularly when the events in questions did not occur within their patrolling communities. Law enforcement

Officer Cory Adams explained, “The need for training and retraining for the use of excessive force was essential at the beginning, but now this constant repetitiveness is unnecessary. How many times do we have to review and re-train when events happen elsewhere?” Officer Space Cowboy, who had 15 years of service, added “The initial intro and training of the use of excessive force was warranted, but now it’s getting to be overbearing.”

Officer Cory Adams, who had 16 years of service, addressed low morale and public pressures when he stated, “Supervisors are now called in so that they can overlook and see that officers are going by state statutes, and if anything goes wrong, they are required to go back to training.” Officer Nathaniel, who had 6 years of service, added “I don’t want to walk on eggshells” and explained “I am more aware of a citizen’s needs and speak to them accordingly based on the training tools I was given.” Officer Nathaniel indicated that he frequently had to participate in retraining due to issues that were unrelated to his own behavior or incidents that occurred elsewhere in the country. Officer El Viejo, who had 28 years of service, stated his belief that existing annual in-service training sessions were sufficient for professional development and expressed:

Training is important and sometimes very necessary. I have seen changes in the statue of the good ole boy system since anti-police sentiment began, and I even had a personal incident where my son was targeted. The officer didn’t know I was a law enforcement officer, and I had to go speak to his sergeant where he was then required to go back to training on being biased. I was disappointed that I even had to go through such a dilemma in these times. Now my son does not like law enforcement officers, and he was even scared of them at one point. I should never have to worry about that, but this officer was

required to go back to training a couple of times to make sure that he understood his own personal biases and prejudices.

Officer Bill, who had 19 years of service, discussed the negative morale felt when he had to re-train when he stated, “I don’t like it when I have to re-train because someone else outside of our area messed up.” Officer Sophia Jones, who had 5 years of service, echoed the sentiments of negative morale when she stated:

Overall, as a department, training has already been in place and available for in-service training, and it should be up to the individual, along with whatever they did wrong, to have to recap. I don’t see why we all have to re-train for the mistakes of a few or the biases of others. To me, all officers should have annual reviews to see what their hidden biases are. Many departments are now requiring officers to participate in training programs designed to educate them about their hidden biases. I have seen too many variations in the news and on social media myself to question the thought that might have been going through their minds. So many times, I see where de-escalation tactics could have been used and were not. So, because of their mistakes, I have to go back and revisit my training.

Officer Marie expressed her frustration on repetitive training when she mentioned:

I have no problem completing my training nor doing my annual in-service training but, since they have been a call out for police reform and accountability, we have done more re-caps than ever. The sad thing is the misconduct of others has made it so difficult for us to even argue about it. I did ask my sarge if this was going to continue, and he told all of us in the zone that we had no choice but to comply. What’s even worse is every time I turn around, I am seeing some officer or officers doing something stupid and making us

all look bad. It seems like the public has taken over how we do our job based on their demand for reform. We don't even have incidents like that here. I am more worried about the fear of us backing off even more because we might be afraid of public complaints or accusations. I am thankful we have body cameras, but still, there are people that will lie on us to get out of trouble.

These statements indicated that officers felt that public pressures and public scrutiny regarding the training and retraining of law enforcement officers had a significant negative impact on morale. Participants noted that the pressures of repetitive training contributed to a decline in morale, leading to feeling of burnout. Overall, the officers' feedback suggested that they believed retraining should be limited to the specific areas where the incidents occurred.

The code listed as excess and lethal force were used interchangeably by law enforcement officers to describe the negative influence on morale due to the misconduct of others. When discussing excessive force, officers indicated that the use of excessive force was more force than was necessary for reasonable control to a situation, making an arrest, or ensuring their own protection. Officers indicated that lethal force was justified only in situations where there was an immediate threat of death or serious injury and should be used strictly as a last resort after all other options have been considered.

There were 31 out of 34 law enforcement officers who reported that incidents involving lethal use of force and excessive use of force had fundamentally changed their community operational procedures. Law enforcement officers recognized ongoing public concerns regarding use of force tactics, which had been heightened by media coverage of prominent cases. Officers noted that the rise in anti-police sentiment and the negative high-profile incidents reported in the news led to increased stress, low morale, and increased public mistrust. Law enforcement officer Robocop

stated, “Since the outcry for reform after the death of George Floyd, there has been a shift in tactics used when it comes to lethal force.” Officer Sondra Brown, who had 9 years of service, expressed her concerns and feelings about situational circumstances and use of force when she stated:

A specific dispatched call can be handled in five or more different ways based on the situations of the call and not based on the textbook of training. Since the death of George Floyd and other incidents, there has been lots of concerns about the use of lethal force. We have been taught to use lethal force as a last resort and only if we believe that either us or others are in imminent danger of death or serious injury. This means, the use of lethal force is highly situational and requires us to make quick judgment while under stress. I can see certain events being questionable, but there are others that are blatantly unnecessary.

Officer Steven noted that the death of George Floyd led to significant changes in the tactics surrounding the use of force. He mentioned that, after several incidents, ground handcuffing and positional affirmation techniques have become mandatory. Officer Greg, who has 7 years of service, added that the agency has been encouraged to explore new techniques and approaches to use of force. Officer James David, who had 10 years of service, voiced his thoughts and further explained:

Since we are being mandated and encouraged in many cases to adopt new techniques and approaches to use of force, I am now also focusing on de-escalation training and techniques as well. It’s sad to say, but I was also thinking about what tactics I would have to use if this thing goes south real quick. Public safety was our

main focus, but use of force was in the forefront based on the negative actions of many. Honestly, despite everything, no one knows exactly how they would feel or act if someone charges at them. I agree that the death of Floyd was unnecessary, but there are times when use of force must be used.

Officer Bill additionally commented, “Officers are constantly reminded to use de-escalation tactics before they even think about lethal force or any use of unnecessary force.” During the interviews, law enforcement officers emphasized the importance of knowing when to use lethal force and when alternative methods should be employed. Participants noted that they should not be collectively penalized for the excessive use of lethal force used by individuals outside of their communities.

Officer Robocop echoed the sentiment of reform and use of force when he explained, “The call for this reform, defunding, and the demobilization of officers have forced so many policy changes, increased training, and has even made changes in the use of lethal force.” Officer Princess Jasmine, who had 9 years of service, spoke of the public pressures that were directly related to lethal force and stated, “Public pressures against lethal force have definitely put a damper on my morale and increased my stress level. I am always worried now if I did the right thing.” Officer El Viejo explained a situation when he thought the use of force was necessary and stated:

I had to use necessary force to defend myself one day while I was on patrol, and I still had to go through all kinds of hoops to make sure I did the right thing. I had to go through re-training, I had to review my body cam footage to see where things could have been different, even when I was told I did the right thing by my supervisor. But that didn't make a bit of difference at the time because the news media was all over it. When

all this George Floyd incident happened, I didn't even want to wear my uniform going home because people were giving me the finger and calling me some nasty names. I was stressed and burned out, not knowing what the next day might bring. I was being blamed for use of force by another officer in another state.

These statements highlighted that officers believed that greater care must be exercised when employing force during stops or investigations. The narratives also noted a decline in morale and expressed concerns over the trajectory of police reform initiatives concerning unrelated misconduct allegations that were not related to the agency of the state. Overall, the officers indicated that the focus shifted towards systemic issues rather than individual misconduct, making it difficult to do their jobs. The persistent emphasis on repetitive training and excessive force within law enforcement culture and training emerged as a central theme driving national ongoing anti-police sentiment. The findings in this theme revealed the intricate and systemic issues present in training methods, accountability frameworks, and the support systems, which addressed the research question and were also linked to low officer morale.

Theme 3. Officers experience declining morale as they balance the emotional toll of daily duties with the added strain of public distrust and national ongoing anti-police sentiment while striving to uphold their oath to “protect and serve.” This theme emerged from officers' accounts of the daily risks they face amid intense public scrutiny, media challenges, and the demands for immediate transparency. There were 33 out of 34 law enforcement officers who shared their reflections on their morale and their deep-seated commitment to the oath they swore to protect and serve their communities. Officers described their oath as a solemn promise to protect and serve their community with honor, integrity, courage, and impartiality. According to the word cloud (see Figure 1), words such as *judged*,

scrutinized, and *tainted* were used to reflect their perceptions of unfairness. The related codes associated with the development of Theme 3 were public scrutiny, media challenges, and immediate transparency. These codes became apparent as officers highlighted how public perception, influenced by the misconduct from some officers, made their duty to serve feel more difficult. Moreover, officers described that they felt their professional honor was strained by negative public perception despite their personal dedication, revealing the strain on officer morale. The third theme of experience declining morale as officers balance the emotional toll of daily duties with the ongoing responsibility to uphold the oath taken to “protect and serve” was aligned under the category of unfairness related to the negative influences on morale and attributed to unfair treatment leading to diminished morale.

Law enforcement officers felt they needed to balance their responsibility to enforce the law with the necessity to de-escalate situations and act impartially in high-stressed scenarios that could be dangerous. Officers Greg Coleman, Ron Swanson, Toni Montana, Nolan, and Sophia Jones all shared experiences that impacted their morale while they sought to uphold their oath to “protect and serve” amid national ongoing anti-police sentiments and mirrored the sentiment that according to Officer Bruce Wayne, who had 9 years of service, stated:

When George Floyd passed, and an officer was stabbed in the neck because he was trying to protect the rights of the community in which he serves to protest something that happened miles away. At that time, I seriously thought about quitting because I was risking my life to protect and serve my community, while they were looking to destroy mine. I faced so many issues while upholding the oath to protect others and no one, not even the news, considered the dangers involved. Many officers have died trying to

protect the rights of others, and it seems like one or two incidents completely erased any good that has been done by any officer.

The oath has been an important reminder of fundamental values. Officer Marie stated, “There has been a shift in the public perceptions due to the misconducts of others in the uniform, not to mention continued public scrutiny and calls for reform that has made my job even harder.”

Officer Bill remarked that the death of George Floyd and the actions of certain officers have created significant pressure on law enforcement. Officer El Viejo, who had 28 years of service, articulated his concerns and the reasons for his declining morale when he stated:

Sometimes you wonder if you want to help people. Budget limitations and personnel shortages made it hard for me to do my job at one point, especially when I wanted to moonlight. Some officers were afraid to wear their uniforms outside of the regular work hours and during special events. After George Floyd’s death, there were inconsistencies due to the lack of a standardization within law enforcement agencies. We had too much mental health issues and racial profiling to worry about. Those guys in uniform that stood around during the incident with George Floyd should have said something. I didn’t even wear my uniform at home that night for fear of what could have happened. I took the oath to protect and serve, but to be in trouble for something I didn’t do is just too much.

Officer Sonic stated that he preferred not to wear his uniform home after the death of George Floyd and conveyed, “Look at what happened, it was seen that the officer was not following protocol on social media and now I am being blamed for that.” Officer Lat added, “I’ve been around too long to worry about my uniform anymore. I am close to retirement. I do miss the good ole days when the honor to protect and serve was taken to heart and you wanted to do your best while wearing the uniform, but it seems now that officers are being blamed for the

misconduct of a few.” Officer Letti further noted, “In my experience and due to the evolving nature of crime and other complex threats, it is difficult to discern the correct course of action while on patrol.” Officer Letti further stated, “I still wear my uniform with pride, but I despise the officers that make me look bad in the eyes of those I serve.” Officer Ron Swanson, who had 16 years of service, explained:

I now have to worry about myself. I recalled an incident when I reported to a dispatched call where the individual asked me if I was going to do to him like what that officer did to George Floyd, and I had to remind the individual that it was in another state and not here in this state. It seems like every time people see things in the news about what some bad cops does, then we all have to end up paying for it. I’ve had to explain myself too many times while on the job, especially in areas where people take what’s stated in the news media as gold. These people won’t even help us if we ask them any questions, especially when a crime happened in their area. So, despite all the training and retraining we do, we are still seen as the bad guys. It seems like trying to uphold the oath I took as an officer means nothing anymore.

Officer Wonder Woman, who had 8 years of service, shared her scenario and stated, “When something negative is reported about law enforcement in the news, I get flipped off from citizens within my patrolling area and sometimes when going home.” Officer Steven, who had 6 years of service, explained that Black officers have experienced a higher frequency of racial slurs during patrols compared to their non-Black officers and stated, “I was called Uncle Tom and sellout.”

Officer Sonic, who had 9 years of service, reflected on his encounters while on patrol and stated:

I have been called names by people in my patrolling area, and people even said they hated the police. I have also spoken to the young officers that I worked alongside, and

many are not wanting to remain officers because they feel like they are not getting any support from the community they patrol. I have tried over and over again to speak to the new officers coming in, but many of them have already decided that they are just going to do their time that they signed up for then try and get a job somewhere else. It's really hard nowadays to even consider what this agency is going to look like in the future. It seems like the oath to "protect and serve" has less value now.

Officer Cory, who had 16 years of service, mentioned that officers have experienced public condemnation, including being labeled as "killers," and have faced notable negative reactions and resistance from the public while on patrol. Officer Cory stated, "Nothing is more painful than the betrayal of those you have to protect out of a sense of duty when they wouldn't think twice about saving you."

These accounts illustrate how intense public criticism and feelings of unfairness have negatively influenced officer morale, eroding the perceived prestige of the profession. Officers reported that public scrutiny, perceived unfairness, and public mistrust have stripped away the sense of honor once tied to their role. Essentially, the responses highlighted a workforce that feels deeply misunderstood, under attack, and unappreciated by the community they serve.

The code media challenge was apparent when officers reflected on the challenges and need for a balance between confidentiality and integrity. All 34 law enforcement officers stated that social media, video recordings, and the news media have affected their morale negatively by only reporting parts of the story, by only showing part of the video clips, and by wrongfully insinuating situational events that make false assumptions about events without the full context. Torres, who had 14 years of service, reflected on some of his challenges as he explained:

I am concerned about an officer's name being tainted, often unfairly, by people doing write-ups and without knowing the details. I am referring to one of the officers who was involved in a shooting, and the officer was in fear of what could happen even though he did nothing wrong. This immediate need to report what has happened and try and be transparent doesn't really give us as officers enough time to have someone really investigate what has happened, because part of the information has been reported immediately, and then it's said that we are continuing with further investigations and that's all we have for now. If someone has said our names when something bad happens, then we are already at fault. It's like the damage has been done. Even when they see it's not true, your name is still out there like you are the bad guy.

When stressing the need for prompt media dissemination, Officer Bill, who had 19 years of service, stated, "As officers, we get treated like the suspect in the eyes of the media."

Officer Princess, who had 10 years of service, discussed her challenges and decline in morale when she explained:

Despite media and recordings, I have seen it where people in our community act differently depending on what side of town they live. The majority are positive and still look out for us, but others that live in certain areas believe that everything they see in the media is going to happen here too. So, when something happens in the media, you can be guaranteed officers are portrayed as the bad guys until real proof has been shown. I just don't understand why we are allowing the news media to dictate how we process our cases.

Officer Evangel, who had 6 years of service, offered his perspective as he recalled:

I no longer look at the news. The media only shows 30 seconds clips that makes the officers look bad. They always talk about racial profiling and racial biases. I recall dealing with two young juveniles, and I tried to talk to them while they were at school. The disrespects I received when they immediately started to say “F” the police. I thought what guidance are they getting from the news. And now, I might have to worry about them as they get older. It’s really sad that these kids have no respect for officers anymore. What’s even worse, the parents are not doing anything about it. One bad cop spoil everything for all of us, then we are all bad, so we have to go back to ground zero and start again. I understand the media is reporting the news for ratings, but they tend to disregard the downstream effects.

Officer Sonic, who had 9 years of service, reflected on challenges to his morale and explained, “I have worked to counter negative perceptions of officers by showing citizens that misconduct was not universal among officers.” Officer Sonic further stated, “I even let them know that we are trained and retrained to not do whatever happened in the news.” Officer Toni Montana, who had 9 years of service, addressed media scrutiny and explained:

When the news reports what one bad cop does and I am dispatched to a call; people tell me they don’t talk to the police, and that makes my job even harder. I try to talk to them and ask them to reconsider. I even remind them that I was trained and retrained to do the right thing, and that what happens on TV does not happen here but, they still distance themselves. I worry about the impact this has on our cases that need to be solved. I worry about my safety and the safety of my fellow officers. False and misleading reports can escalate tensions and lead to unnecessary violence or increase criminal activities.

Participants highlighted that the media's tendency to swiftly report negative actions by law enforcement officers, often before all investigative facts are known, can damage professional reputations prematurely and lower morale. These statements pointed out that issues of transparency related to ongoing investigations and media scrutiny have led to reduced morale and diminished public confidence. Overall, officers felt that immediate reporting to the news media on cases not yet fully investigated has had negative repercussions on the impending case, public safety, and legal consideration. Officers also noted that the misconduct allegations portrayed in media were not always accurate.

The code of immediate transparency emerged when officers expressed the urgent need for transparency within their agency due to changes in policies and a decline in public trust. Out of 34 law enforcement officers, 17 felt that the public and the media's immediate demands for explanation concerning incidents such as shootings, DUIs, domestic violence, and any other negative acts of officers had negatively affected the morale of law enforcement officers. Officers noted that the pressure for prompt reporting and public access to information posed challenges related to due process and as well as the welfare of both the officer and their family. Officer Condor expressed his discontent when he stated, "I feel like everything I do now I am under a microscope. What happened to off-duty time? I have to be really careful now with my life outside of the agency." Officer Batman, who had 20 years of service, stated:

I am afraid to even go out to enjoy myself with my family. It seems now like everything an officer does that is not related to the job, or even while they are on duty, is being scrutinized. I have seen it where the names of law enforcement officers are being reported for DUI, domestic violence, or other mishaps that are not directly related to the job, or while they are in uniform. I do understand we are held at higher standards, but I

am in fear that my name could be trampled in the mud if something is misunderstood or is no one else's business. It's sad when there has been Black on Black crime throughout numerous communities and there has been no immediate reporting or major news coverage of their negative activities. Once the media talks about Blacks and Whites then race becomes an issue. That really pisses me off that people don't really see it for what it is. Don't get me wrong, when people have hidden racial bias within their agencies then they need to address it. When society can't see that all this fuss sometimes is one sided and biased on their part, they are just blind to what is really happening.

Officer Letti, who had 22 years of service, expressed her concerns regarding the quick dissemination of misinformation and a decline in morale, stating:

I have always been concerned of reports of anything negative being reported against me that might reflect badly on my family, so I try my best do the right thing on a daily basis. I saw it on the news when this officer had a DUI, and he wasn't even on duty. It was all over the news that he got a DUI and his name was out in the open. People were commenting that he should be locked up because officers don't take it easy on people that they stop with a DUI. I understand that we as officers are held by a higher standard, but I would at least like the chance if I was off duty for my name not to be all over the news if something happened. People tend to forget that we are human too, and we make mistakes, nobody is perfect.

Officer James David, who had 10 years of service, spoke of the need for immediate transparency and the negative impacts on the law enforcement profession stating:

When someone with a DUI gets arrested, they are not on the news, but if I had a DUI, I would not want to be on the news immediately because that has nothing to do with my

work; that might have been on my personal time. The demand to immediately report any negative activities of a law enforcement officer is not needed until all the facts are in place. Lately, I see it where there are officers who do things on their personal time, and they get reported right away. And of course, the news is always ready to listen and ask family members questions or make assumptions of what might have happened. To me, this is just a disgusting display to belittle an officer for just being human.

Officer Condor, who had 15 years of service, addressed the potential risk posed to law enforcement personnel's physical safety, personal privacy, and mental health, noting that stress may increase due to the release of names and the questioning of families. Officer Condor further added:

I remember when the uniform and the badge demanded respect. The fear of not doing anything wrong in the eyes of the law was enough to keep anyone on the straight and narrow, and the need to report something bad to a law enforcement officer was immediate. Now, the immediate report of any negative activities of a law enforcement officer when something personal happened has taken away the personal side of their lives. It's like I can't even do anything without being prosecuted if something bad happens that wasn't even my fault. Some of us sometimes walk on eggshells around other people while we are off duty just to avoid any issues.

Officer James David, who had 10 years of service, discussed policy changes within the agency and explained a scenario when he stated:

So many changes and fears of being used as a scape goat. I know it has been politically driven. I had a fleeing suspect and had someone that I was training that was doing a ride-along with me. Based on the situation with a fleeing felon, I had the right to shoot the

individual because I didn't know if the suspect had a gun, but in the split second I chose to tase the individual due to the fear of being ridiculed and being labeled as someone racial. My life could have been in danger based on my re-action. I chose the non-lethal method to avoid any issues. What lessons am I teaching the person that was with me?

What about my family if I had chosen the wrong way to react?

Officer Princess Jasmine, who had 9 years of service, explained her concerns for immediate transparency by adding:

My concerns are related to my family and what would happen if something negative was not properly investigated. When reviewing body cam due to the request for immediate transparency, individuals viewing the video may have their own ideas and thoughts of what happened. If there was no additional body cam footage with additional angles available to support what has happened, people might come to the wrong conclusions. There have been officers stressed about what could happen to them based on the request for immediate transparency by the public. The stress involved are the sacrifices that law enforcement officers must make that regular civilian will not make and do not understand the sacrifices that officers make on a daily basis. What would happen if I really got burned out?

These statements highlighted the adverse effects on morale stemming from increased pressures and demands for immediate transparency among law enforcement officers, driven by changing public expectations and policy adjustments. While transparency has been vital for accountability and fostering trust, some individuals expressed concerns that it could undermine operational effectiveness, lead to fears of retaliation, and affect the families of law enforcement officers. The codes of public scrutiny, media challenges, and immediate transparency highlighted

the negative impacts and significant challenges faced by law enforcement agencies, particularly when information has been released prematurely or managed without careful consideration. These statements suggested that the morale of law enforcement officers has declined due to ongoing investigations, violation of due process rights, loss of credibility, distorted public perceptions, and the erosion of resulting from negative cycles.

Evaluation of the Findings

The results of this research in a southern state's law enforcement agency were new and therefore had no previous studies to compare or support a southern state's perspective. However, the results of this research study supported several previous research studies and their official findings. Berman and Wilfrom (2020), Stogner (2020), and Stirling (2022) highlighted the importance of feeling supported by criminal justice stakeholders, peers, supervisors, and political leaders was critical to officer morale. Interview data collected in this study confirmed the findings, and the interview data collected coincided with the importance of support from supervisors, peers, community, and leadership to increase officer morale. Additionally, Anderson et al. (2017) spotlighted the importance of leadership and supervisory support. Participants in this research collaborated on the importance of leadership and supervisory support on morale.

Bishopp et al. (2020) identified law enforcement officers went through much strain in performing their daily duties and when they did not receive support from their communities, this created experiences of strain. Capellan et al. (2020) identified that there was a relation between the community and law enforcement officers that was tied to the morale displayed within the law enforcement agency. The findings were consistent with earlier studies, suggesting that officers' morale had declined due to ongoing community distrust and negative sentiments towards law enforcement officers. Stirling (2022) and Tung (2020) referenced that morale enhancement of

law enforcement officers had relied on the effective collaboration between law enforcement and the communities they serve. The results of this study added to the understanding of morale and the collaboration needed between law enforcement and the communities in which they have strived to protect and serve. Stirling (2022) found that morale in the workplace has been found to be impactful from both a positive and negative perspective, where unethical behavior in leadership was proven to influence job satisfaction in the opposite way that positive leadership did. Interview data collected in this study added to this research in that the results found on morale in this workplace had both positive and negative perspectives. All participants expressed both positive and negative perspectives they had on morale within this agency.

Callender et al. (2018) and Thoen et al. (2020) proposed both solutions, redirections, and cultural shift based on the future of law enforcement. This study also showed that there has been a cultural shift in law enforcement that has decreased morale. The results of this research confirmed earlier findings and corroborated with Copeland et al. (2022) and Dogan (2017) that negative perceptions of law enforcement, fueled by anti-police sentiment and critical media coverage, have negatively impacted officer morale. The onset of anti-police sentiment has coincided with a surge of unfavorable publicity (Bishopp et al., 2020) this research has confirmed that morale is low due to public scrutiny, media challenges, and the need for immediate transparency. Officers' responses coincided with media challenges and the need to balance confidentiality and integrity, emphasizing that the news media have affected their morale negatively by only reporting parts of the story, by only showing part of the video clips, and by wrongfully insinuating situational events without knowing the full context.

Summary

This chapter outlines the methods used to ensure trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and the confirmability of this qualitative case study. Officers emphasized that a dependable support system, offering emotional guidance and shared coping tactics, was crucial for preserving morale and improving overall officer well-being. Officers highlighted that national ongoing anti-police sentiment and public criticism had lowered morale and created feelings of frustration, diminished public support, and reduced professional pride, particularly as they faced scrutiny over excessive and lethal use of force, amid calls for police reform and accountability. Participating officers also noted that maintaining morale became increasingly difficult; they described the added strain of public distrust while striving to uphold their oath to protect and serve. The primary finding was that while internal changes in leadership had created a positive impact, external factors like negative community interactions and public mistrust had continued to erode morale. Officers felt that the focus had shifted toward systemic issues rather than individual misconduct, and they indicated that the motto “to protect and serve” had lost its significance as a guiding principle, leading to a decline in morale. The concluding chapter discusses the researcher’s implications, recommendations, and conclusions for this qualitative case study.

Chapter 5: Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions

The problem addressed was the nationwide decline in the morale of law enforcement officers in the United States (Police Executive Research Forum, 2021). The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how national ongoing anti-police sentiment shaped the morale of law enforcement officers in a southern state law enforcement agency that did not experience issues of defunding and riots that many areas of the country experienced. This case study involved interviewing 34 current Southern law enforcement officers. In addressing RQ1, specific codes were identified and then grouped into broader categories to form themes. The three themes that emerged were having a reliable support system helped officers sustain morale through emotional encouragement and shared coping strategies, officers perceived that national ongoing anti-police sentiment and public criticism lowered morale by creating feelings of frustration, diminished public support, and reduced professional pride, particularly as they faced repetitive training and scrutiny over excessive and lethal force amid calls for police reform and accountability, and officers experience declining morale as they balance the emotional toll of daily duties with the added strain of public distrust and national ongoing anti-police sentiment while striving to uphold their oath to protect and serve.

The nature of this case study's inherent limitations stemming from its specific context, restrict its generalizability for broader academic research on how law enforcement officers perceive their morale amidst prevailing national ongoing anti-police sentiments. This study presented potential constraints due to the interviewer biases, which arose due to the researcher's active involvement as a graduate of the citizen police academy program, and with numerous relatives and friends associated with law enforcement. A further constraint was the instability introduced by evolving leadership dynamics and leadership changes. Historically, the changes in

leadership can have an extreme impact on morale based on factors like transparency, leadership style, and overall context of the transition (Halstead, 1997). Furthermore, the third limitation faced was the participant's hesitation to discuss experiences and perceptions because of the blue code of silence. Moreover, the fact that the researcher's professional role outside of National University required reporting suspicions of child or elderly abuse, possible harm to self or others, and committed crimes to the appropriate authorities.

This chapter explored the implications of the results found in this research case study, the recommendations for best practices, and the recommendations for future research. This study established practical realistic recommendations for law enforcement agencies, administrators, and political leaders to consider the importance of morale and support. Furthermore, these recommendations were designed to foster a resilient agency culture, enhancing public trust through continued commitment to public safety and community outreach. This chapter concluded with suggestions and potential future research proposals that could possibly be integrated with other qualitative research or quantitative analysis to attain additional insight into subjective experiences on the morale of law enforcement officers.

Implications

The findings of this case study highlighted significant concerns that must be addressed to improve a law enforcement officer's morale.

Implication 1

An implication of this research study was that officers felt that having a good support system significantly made a difference regarding their morale. Officers believed that having a good support system encompassed not only their immediate supervisors, but their peers, community, and executive leadership. Participants emphasized the importance of their immediate

supervisors and the crucial role they played in supporting actionable steps while patrolling. Moreover, ensuring adherence to ethical conduct, acting as a bridge between senior leadership and front-line patrolling officers, and with national ongoing anti-police sentiments, immediate supervisors were then critical in navigating public sentiment and bridging the gaps between their officers and the community in which they patrol. This result aligns with Hilal and Litsey (2020), who suggested the importance of leadership and support remaining consistent and decreasing an officer's turnover.

These results highlighted the importance of leadership and support while on patrol. Officers explained that the new executive leadership and political leadership have created a morale booster through open communication, active participation, and by showing genuine support for their well-being while on patrol. The officers were unwavering in their assertion that their daily contributions were recognized and highly valued by leadership.

In the wake of anti-police sentiment and despite ongoing national anti-police sentiments, participants verbalized the critical importance of support not only from a leadership perspective but also on a personal level. Officers explained that having backup from co-workers when dealing with issues unrelated to work has been vital to their morale, mental health, and fosters a sense of community within their profession. Many of the officers believed that reliable support helped to sustain morale through emotional encouragement. This result aligned with the findings of Michaud et al. (2024) and Schafer (2009) who indicated that insufficient leadership has resulted in negative consequences and often supervisors played a key role in the morale and retention of their departments and agencies. Officers believed that having an effective leader built a positive climate that fostered trust and had been an effective tool that directly impacted morale.

Implication 2

An implication of this research was that officers felt a decrease in morale due to the breakdown in trust and cooperation from the public. Officer believed that the misconduct of a few officers had villainized the law enforcement agency and that public trust and cooperation with law enforcement officers would continue to diminish as new cases of misconduct emerged. Officers noted that national ongoing anti-police sentiments had reduced cooperation with law enforcement and explained that the public's distrust of law enforcement had significantly hampered investigatory efforts by decreasing citizen cooperation, crime reporting, and information sharing. Officers believed that the fear of interactions with law enforcement had created a climate of apprehension among certain communities, leading to continued reluctance. This finding was consistent with previous research on national criticism towards law enforcement and the public's attitudes towards law enforcement with declined institutional trust and increased negative perception of the conduct of law enforcement (Copeland, 2022; Shjarback, 2022).

This result highlighted the ongoing decline in morale among law enforcement officers, stemming from the public's perceptions and the daily demands of their profession, particularly when the misconduct of a law enforcement officer or officers erodes public trust. Participants believed that fostering transparency through open communication and accountability, and engaging with the community, were key factors in fostering a sense of partnership. This result corroborated with prior studies which found that officers went through much strain in performing their daily duties and when they did not receive support from their communities which created the experience of strain (Bishopp et al., 2020). This result was also consistent with Capellan et al.

(2020), who identified that the relationship between the community and law enforcement officers was tied to the morale displayed within the law enforcement agency.

Implication 3

An implication of this research was that officers felt their sacrifices were not being recognized. Respondents reported jeopardizing their lives while endeavoring to fulfill their sworn duty to protect civil rights, even as the citizens' protests concerned events in a different jurisdiction. Officers believed that they had placed their lives on the line daily in an environment where they felt unappreciated. Officers explained that they were getting desensitized to the job due to being judged and scrutinized. Moreover, officers expressed significant apprehension that proactive policing measures and the necessary use of force could lead to adverse outcomes and public backlash, despite complying with standard operating procedures. Officers felt that this backlash could not only affect them as an individual but can also have significant impact on their families. This thought aligned with the assertions of Kula (2017) and Queiros et al. (2020), who referred to stressors regarding the constant need to represent the title and position held as a law enforcement officer.

This result reflected the idealized version of police work, based on the oath taken to protect and serve. Officers felt that upholding the law meant serving the public and safeguarding life and property. Moreover, public scrutiny and negative narratives based on the media's portrayals and social movements, contributed to the sense of being constantly villainized. This result aligned with the phenomenon also referred to as the Ferguson effect, where strained relationships between officers and their communities, fueled by low morale, increased stress, and feelings of betrayal, could lead to a reduction of proactive policing (Capellan, et al., 2019; Hosko, 2018).

Recommendations for Practice

There were several factors that influenced morale within the law enforcement agency and multiple factors that influenced morale as a law enforcement officer. In an environment of pervasive anti-police sentiment and a systemic crisis of public trust, law enforcement officers experienced significant demoralization and operational challenges, underscoring a persistent requirement for enhanced transparency and accountability. In contrast, the need for long term aspirations vital for rebuilding community trust was identified and formally included as a necessary part of the research methodology for subsequent work. The findings presented in the preceding chapter indicated that morale was influenced by multiple influences. The following recommendations served as a guide outlining practical solutions needed to effectively bridge the gap between the research results and real-world challenges.

Recommendation 1

In the context of pervasive national criticism of law enforcement, a strong support system has been crucial for sustaining an officer's morale. Participants felt that having a good support system significantly made a difference regarding their morale. When considering the positive changes in the morale of law enforcement officers due to the support of the recently elected executive leadership. It is recommended that leadership should be actively involved in fostering a supportive environment and addressing the issues of morale within their agencies. This could include effective communication and prioritizing transparency, along with active support, advocacy, and recognition that celebrates achievements. According to Thoen et al. (2020), morale has improved when an officer felt valued, recognized, and appreciated. These approaches could significantly increase professional satisfaction, offer validation, and continue to enhance morale.

Recommendation 2

The morale of law enforcement officers has been questioned due to continued nationwide anti-police sentiments (Police Executive Research Forum, 2021). Participants felt a decrease in morale due to the breakdown in trust and cooperation from the public. Capellan et al. (2020) found that many law enforcement officers were afraid that strict adherence to the agency's policy would lead to an unwillingness to assist with investigations. When considering the morale of law enforcement officers within an agency, agencies should prioritize building community trust through proactive engagement strategies like outreach programs, hosting community events, and conducting town hall meetings. It is recommended that all criminal justice stakeholders should continue prioritizing strategies that foster trust and collaboration between patrol officers and the communities they serve. This initiative could include launching localized digital platforms for swift complaint resolution, paired with officer-led community walks to strengthen resident rapport and engagement.

Recommendation 3

The imbalances created by anti-police sentiments have not encouraged law enforcement officers to passionately engage in their work (Violanti et al., 2018). Some law enforcement officers have responded to anti-police sentiments by choosing to stay only within their department and their agencies (Choi, 2020). Participants felt that morale has decreased due to stressors related to the perceived gap between their sworn duties and actual practices. It is recommended that agencies engage frontline officers in developing policies affecting their work while leveraging first-line supervisors to establish and reinforce uniform performance standards. It is further recommended that law enforcement agencies implement strategies that focus on transparency, while enhancing communication through active listening, explained actions,

intentions, and providing clarity to address any misconceptions. According to Arango et al. (2021) and Ilchi et al. (2022), as an introduction to reform and changes directed to the culture of law enforcement agencies, there has been a demand for a focus on transparency and accountability in the United States.

Recommendations for Future Research

As national ongoing anti-police sentiment continues, this case study provided limited insight and a very narrow perspective into understanding the morale of law enforcement officers in one sector of a southern state law enforcement agency. While this research offered useful insight into the thoughts, feelings, and perspective of patrolling law enforcement officers employed by this southern state law enforcement agency, it was not necessarily transferable to other law enforcement agencies. Research on anti-police sentiment and law enforcement officer's morale are often not transferable since both are significantly specific to the local context. To have transferable value, this case study research would be enriched by use of comparative case study research, to further explain patterns of similarity and differences generating broader concepts and theory development. The research will use a comparative analysis to explicitly examine the shared features and differing aspects of the two sets of findings, with an aim to understand how each specific context influences the results. This would further allow trends to be identified across multiple law enforcement agencies and explain the reasons behind the variations.

A representative sample that is generalizable in research would further assist a researcher to understand the morale of a law enforcement officer during anti-police sentiment and national ongoing anti-police sentiment by accurately mirroring a larger population's key characteristics (like age, gender, beliefs), so the findings would be applied beyond the sample to all law

enforcement officers. This approach could be achieved through a quantitative study where the probability methods like stratified or random sampling to minimize bias and ensure accurate, proportional representation of all subgroups. It would guarantee a balanced sample that enhanced findings' validity. As a qualitative research case study, this research provided rich, in-depth context on a law enforcement officer's lived experiences and emotional realities. However, there is also a need for future research from a quantitative perspective that can specifically explore complex factors on morale, both internal and external, that influence and impact the morale of law enforcement officers by focusing on periods of public hostility. This would further explore subjective perceptions and can uncover how officers cope and how the policing culture itself influences a law enforcement officer's morale. Future research on declining morale should focus on a holistic approach that evaluates intervention strategies.

Conclusions

Anti-police sentiment, negative attitudes, and mistrust against law enforcement officers continue to be a complex combination of factors that include experiences with perceived injustices, racial and ethnic disparities, high-profile incidents, negative media coverages, disconnected community and police relations, and political rhetoric (Bishopp et al., 2020; Capellan et al., 2020). All of this continues to have a significant effect on the morale of law enforcement officers (Stirling, 2022). This case study of morale in a southern states' law enforcement agency depicted a distinctive insight into what has influenced the morale of law enforcement officers. The purpose of this research was to explore how national ongoing anti-police sentiment shaped the morale of participating law enforcement officers within a southern state law enforcement agency by gathering qualitative evidence of their time while patrolling, and how they perceive the morale of themselves, their peers, their leadership, and their agency.

This research was relevant because the United States continues to face unprecedented occurrences of ongoing anti-police sentiments with numerous oppositions to law enforcement officers in the line of duty (Pooley & Turns, 2022; Wyllie, 2022). The results of this research indicated that morale increased when the newly elected executive leadership and political leadership fostered a more supportive environment for their officers. The research implied that public criticism and negative sentiment can lead to a decrease in an officer's morale. To improve morale, officers need a leadership style that prioritizes open communication, positive reinforcement, and fosters a culture of support. Future research on declining morale should focus on a holistic approach that evaluates intervention strategies. Law enforcement officers are often perceived to be held to a higher standard than civilians due to their significant authority and the responsibilities they carry. Amidst sustained national ongoing anti-police, officer morale is critical, as it directly impacts public trust and operational effectiveness. However, it is essential to remember that behind every badge is a human being, individuals who, like everyone else, have families, emotions, and personal lives that deserve understanding for the unique stress and sacrifices they endure.

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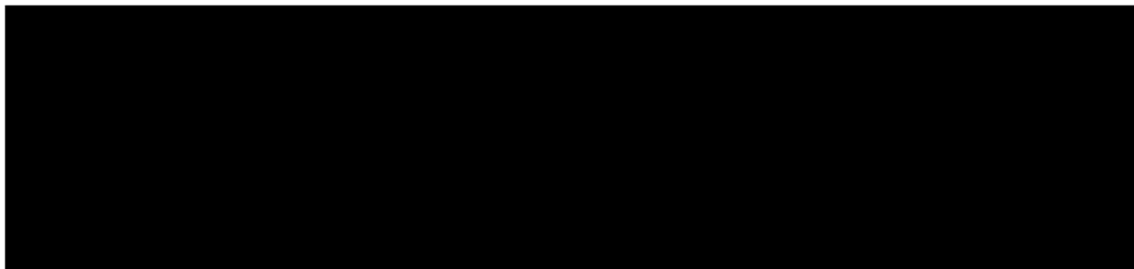
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Appendix A

[Administrator]’s Permission Letter

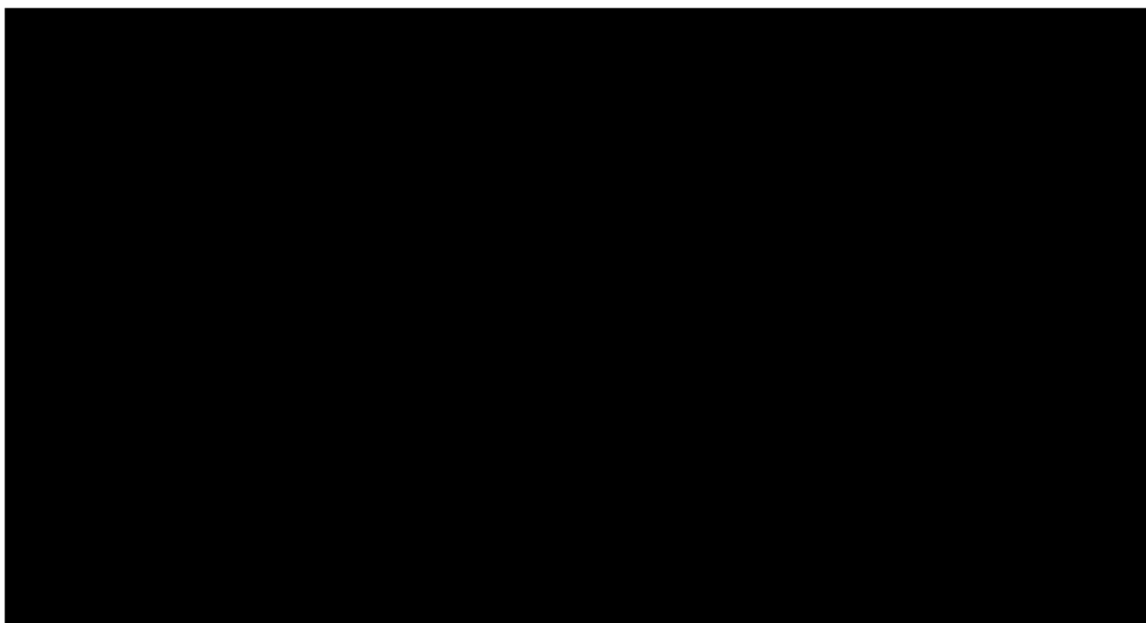


Ms. Suzette M. Cudjoe-Hodge
Doctoral Student, Business Administration
Northcentral University
[Redacted]

June 5, 2023

Ms. Cudjoe-Hodge,

Upon your recent request, I grant consent for my agency to participate in your doctoral study, “Understanding Morale in a Southern State’s Law Enforcement Agency in Times of Continued National Anti-Police Sentiments: A Qualitative Case Study.” Moving forward, please communicate with the Public Information Officers at [Redacted] to facilitate your research. Wishing you the best as you undertake this endeavor.



Appendix B

Recruitment Invitation Letter

Dear Prospective Participant,

My name is Suzette M. Cudjoe-Hodge. I am a doctoral student at National University (formally known as Northcentral University) Business Administration Program with a focus in Criminal Justice and an Alumni of JSO's Citizens Police Academy (CPA). I am respectfully requesting your participation in a doctoral research study that I am conducting titled: **Understanding Morale in a Southern State's Law Enforcement Agency in Times of Ongoing National Anti-Police Sentiments.**

The purpose of this study is to explore if national anti-police sentiment has altered the morale of law enforcement officers in a southern state that does not have the issues of defunding and riots that many areas of the country experienced. This study aims to understand the impact of law enforcement's morale during the wake of anti-police sentiments and the ongoing impact of anti-police sentiments based on current events in a southern state.

Eligibility: You may participate in this research if you meet all of the following criteria:

1. Certified full-time law enforcement officer.
2. Employed with the sheriff's office for over five years.
3. Have worked patrol in any zone (motorcycle, tactical or patrol unit).

Participation is completely voluntary and there will be three 100.00 gift cards that will be raffled at the end of the research study publication. All information collected during the study will be maintained on a confidential basis, where access will be restricted to only the person conducting the study. Your name will not be disclosed, nor will details of your answers be given to anyone.

With your permission, the face-to-face or Zoom interviews with the researcher will be recorded and typed up as a written transcript. The transcripts will then be examined to ensure that all the vital information has been captured. The transcripts will not contain your name or any information about you that would allow you to be identified. The only people who will have access to the transcripts is the researcher. Some of your comments may be included in a report on the study, but these will be completely anonymous.

Thanking you in advance for your time and consideration for participation.

Sincerely

*Suzette M. Cudjoe-Hodge MSMHC MSRC CVA PhD Student (DBA)
Navy Veteran & Member of Veterans Counsel of Duval County Florida
Life Member of Veterans of Foreign Wars
Life Member of Disabled American Veterans
Member of American Legion Post 0400
Member of American Legion Riders Post 137*



Appendix C

Recruitment Invitation Letter

Interview Instrument – Active Law Enforcement Officers

Research Q1.

How do law enforcement officers perceive their morale during national ongoing anti-police sentiments?

How would you define morale?

From your perspective and based on your experiences. What factors determine morale in law enforcement?

Describe the overall morale in your department?

What affects morale in your department?

What factors can have a positive effect?

What factors can have a negative effect?

Can you describe any departmental changes since anti-police sentiments occurred over the last 5 years?

In your experience. How would you explain the effects of negative press on morale as a law enforcement officer?

Can you describe a scenario that might have altered your morale with national ongoing anti-police sentiments?

Since the beginning of anti-police sentiments. Can you describe any negative community events that occurred while you were on duty?

When something negative is reported about law enforcement in the news, do you experience a difference in the public on those workdays?

If so, please describe the experience.

How might that affect your morale as a law enforcement officer?

When something positive is reported about law enforcement in the news, do you experience a difference in public on those workdays?

If so, please describe the experience.

How might that affect your morale as a law enforcement officer?

Has the use of a body cam affected your morale as a law enforcement officer? If so, how?

From your perspective as a law enforcement officer. How has the expectation for transparency affected your duties as a law enforcement officer?

If so, how has it affected your morale?

Appendix D

Informed Consent Letter



National University IRB
9338 Lightwave Ave., San Diego, CA 92123
irb@nu.edu

Introduction

My name is Suzette M. Cudjoe-Hodge. I am a doctoral student at National University (formerly known as Northcentral University) in the Business Administration Program with a focus in Criminal Justice, and an Alumni of the [REDACTED]

I am conducting a research study on how morale is perceived in a southern state when faced with continued national anti-police sentiments. The name of this research study is Understanding Morale in a Southern State's Law Enforcement Agency in Times of Continued National Anti-Police Sentiments. A Qualitative Case Study. All participation is completely voluntary, and I will be available to address any questions or concerns that you may have.

Eligibility

You may participate in this research if you meet all of the following criteria:

1. The law enforcement officer is a certified full-time employee.
2. If the law enforcement officer has been employed with the sheriff's office for over five years.
3. If the law enforcement officer has worked patrol in any zone (motorcycle, tactical or patrol unit).

Note: My hope is to include 30-35 participants in this research

Please read this form carefully and ask any question you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

Activities

The study activities include:

1. A one-on-one face to face interview (in person or via Zoom) for 30-45 minutes at a location that is convenient for the officer.
2. An invite to review the transcribed interview transcripts to ensure accuracy, to correct any errors, or to make additional adjustments for clarification.

Note: If the law enforcement officer does not wish to complete this study, they can stop at any time during the process.

During these activities, you will be asked questions about:

- Demographics: "Your age, gender, time in service, and race"
- Morale and anti-police sentiments
- National anti-police sentiments
- Anti-police sentiments and daily activities (past and present)

Risks

There are minimal foreseeable risk or discomfort associated with this research. You can still skip any question you do not wish to answer, skip any activity, or stop participation at any time.

Some possible risk may include:

The identification of the participating law enforcement officer.

Identification of the sheriff's department being used in the study.

Note: To decrease any risk, all names will be aliases chosen by the officers themselves.



National University IRB
9338 Lightwave Ave., San Diego, CA 92123
irb@nu.edu

Benefits

A greater awareness of issues of morale perceived by law enforcement officers within the sheriff's department of ongoing anti-police sentiments.
Additional statistical data that can be used for further studies.

Audio Recordings

I would like to record you via manual audio recording and back up recorder face-to-face interviews and via Zoom recording feature during the interview sessions.
You can disable the video function of the online meeting platform at any time.

Compensation

Participation is completely voluntary and there will be three 100.00-dollar gift cards that will be raffled at the end of the research study publication.
The winners will be notified via email to contact the researcher to set up a time and place to collect the gift cards.

Mandated Reporting

My professional role outside of National University requires me to report any suspicions of child abuse, abandonment or neglect, elderly abuse, possible harm to self or others, threats to harm or death, and the reporting of committed crimes to the appropriate authorities.

Confidentiality

I will keep the records of this study private and take reasonable measures to protect the security of all your personal information. In any report made public, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you.

Privacy and Data Protection

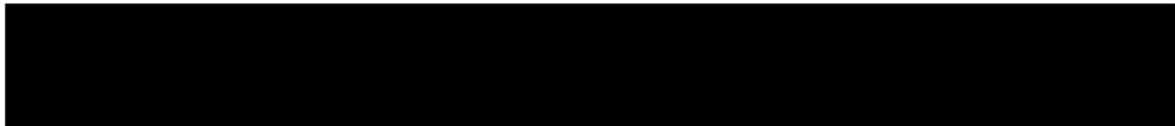
All reasonable measures will be taken to ensure the data is secured and protected.
Note: Only the dissertation committee, the National University IRB, and the doctoral student completing triangulation for the data will have access to the data.
The data will be stored for three years, then deleted electronically along with any paper data that was kept securely will be burned and destroyed.

How the Results Will be Used

The results will be published in my dissertation transcripts and will be shared in a presentation and publication.
Note: No participants will be identified in the results.

Mandated Reporting

My professional role outside of National University requires me to report any suspicions of child abuse, abandonment or neglect, elderly abuse, possible harm to self or others, threats to harm or death, and the reporting of committed crimes to the appropriate authorities.

Contact information.



National University IRB
9338 Lightwave Ave., San Diego, CA 92123
irb@nu.edu

If you have any questions regarding your rights in this research or if any problem or injury occurs during participation, please contact the NU Institution Review Board (IRB) at irb@ncu.edu or 1888-327-2877 ext. 8014.

Appendix E

Informed Consent Letter

Date: 5-24-2024

IRB #: IRB-FY23-24-997

Title: Understanding Morale in a Southern State's Law Enforcement Agency in Times of Ongoing National Anti-Police Sentiments. A Qualitative Case Study

Creation Date: 3-27-2024

End Date:

Status: Approved

Principal Investigator: Suzette Cudjoe-Hodge

Review Board: NU IRB

Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type Initial	Review Type Expedited	Decision Approved
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Key Study Contacts

Member Suzette Cudjoe-Hodge	Role Principal Investigator	Contact s.cudjoe-hodge5707@o365.ncu.edu
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Member Suzette Cudjoe-Hodge	Role Primary Contact	Contact s.cudjoe-hodge5707@o365.ncu.edu
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Member Vicki Lindsay	Role Co-Principal Investigator	Contact vlindsay@ncu.edu
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