

Examining the Barriers to Mental Health Resources for Police Officers

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Introduction

The purpose of this critical appraisal is to identify barriers to mental health resources for police officers. The intention of this research project is to provide a detailed report in the field of law enforcement. Requirements and responsibilities of a police officer are extensive, as their role in today's society encompass varying and complex aspects, including exposure to conflict, violence, and tragedy on a daily basis. Current literature demonstrates police officers are among the top ten careers to have an increased risk of developing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Szeto et al., 2019). As a result, police officers are more susceptible to negative mental health effects, such as suicide and depression. This leads to the research question: Are police officers receiving the mental health resources they need? In order to gain a better understanding of the literature, there will be additional questions to this appraisal: what measures the effectiveness of the mental health resources, and where can the literature improve?

Background

The American Psychiatric Association (2015) defines Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as an overwhelming, shocking event that an individual has experienced, and is unable to recover from the initial incident. Front line workers, including police officers, are often called to stressful situations, which puts themselves at risk. Naturally, it is common to have feelings of fear and worry. However, if an incident arises and suddenly triggers an individual long after a traumatic event, it becomes a concern. This could lead to police officers facing mental health issues, taking extra sick days and potentially in suicide (Di Nota et al., 2020).

Methods

To conduct a critical appraisal, a secondary literature review was completed. The focus was on scholarly articles that are peer reviewed. For the purpose of this review, magazines and newspapers were excluded from the research. The keywords that were used to find this content: Police Officers, Mental Health Resources, Stigmatization, PTSD, and Mental Health. To narrow the results, it was important to highlight police officer’s mental health, not civilians. In the search for relevant material, Google Scholar was the search engine primarily used. Supplementary information was collected from EBSCO, Google, and ProQuest.

Results

Throughout the literature, common themes became evident. The mental health resources provided in law enforcement municipalities are successful, however, the issue raised is the barriers stopping police officers from attaining these resources. Stigmatization of receiving help is a consistent barrier throughout the literature being researched. The sub themes suggested are police culture as well as resilience and mental health knowledge within policing. One of the programs for first responders is called Road to Mental Readiness (R2MR). This is a short term program, for long term mental health outcomes (Szeto et al., 2019). Which focuses on reducing barriers and increasing resilience in first responders. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is also a common theme used throughout the literature. One major outlier in one of the articles Regehr et al. (2019) stated that police officers become desensitized and therefore are at a decreased risk of developing PTSD. However, throughout the other literature researched, police officers are more susceptible to PTSD.

Discussion

After conducting a critical appraisal, the key factors discussed in these themes represent barriers to accessing mental health resources for police officers. It has already been identified that the mental health resources for police officers are effective, the main issue revolves around the barriers. Pluralistic ignorance is a large part of police culture. An officer on the force may be struggling with their mental health, however, when working within a team, it can be more of a challenge to seek professional help without the fear of stigmatization (Karaffa & Koch, 2016). In a study for the R2MR program, first responder participants reported fewer stigmatized attitudes and increased resilience towards mental health (Szeto et al., 2019).

One consistent find across the literature is self reporting. If seeking help, an individual must complete a self assessment and report all signs and symptoms. Failure to properly self assess could lead to the wrong treatment. Research has shown that it is difficult to recognize ones own feelings and the outside perspective is sometimes vital in recognizing signs of distress. Therefore, questioning the effectiveness of self reporting (Di Nota et al., 2020).

Challenges faced while conducting research was revolved around how police officers handle mental health issues with civilians. It was important to closely examine the word selection during the research process. It was crucial for the information to be consistent, all while ensuring it related back to the research question being asked.

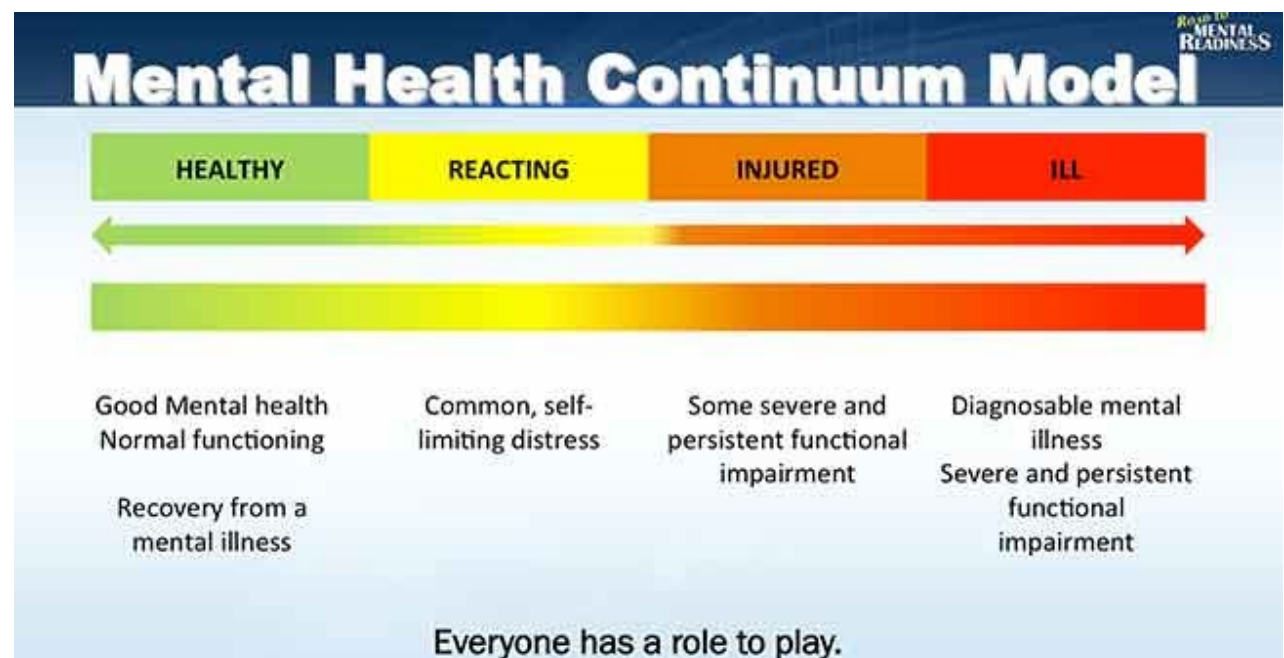
Recommendations

Mental health resources for police officers are proven to be effective for the officers who reach out for help. However, after a review of the literature it is evident there are gaps that need to be further researched. This research was conducted to gain a better understanding of the current literature on mental health resources available to police officers. As this critical appraisal evolved, the topic became more complex. This resulted in a need for further research in order to gain a better understanding of the change that is needed to be implemented to ensure police officers mental health.

One way this research can be utilized is to provide incentives for attending annual classes that are focused on educating police officers on stigmatization. It is important to implement training so one is able to recognize if someone is struggling internally or is properly self assessing. Making self care classes and counseling mandatory is also key. Finding ways to normalize discussing feelings would be beneficial in both the short and long term. This will lead to achieving and maintaining a healthy mind and ensuring police officers can perform their duties to the best of their abilities.

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