

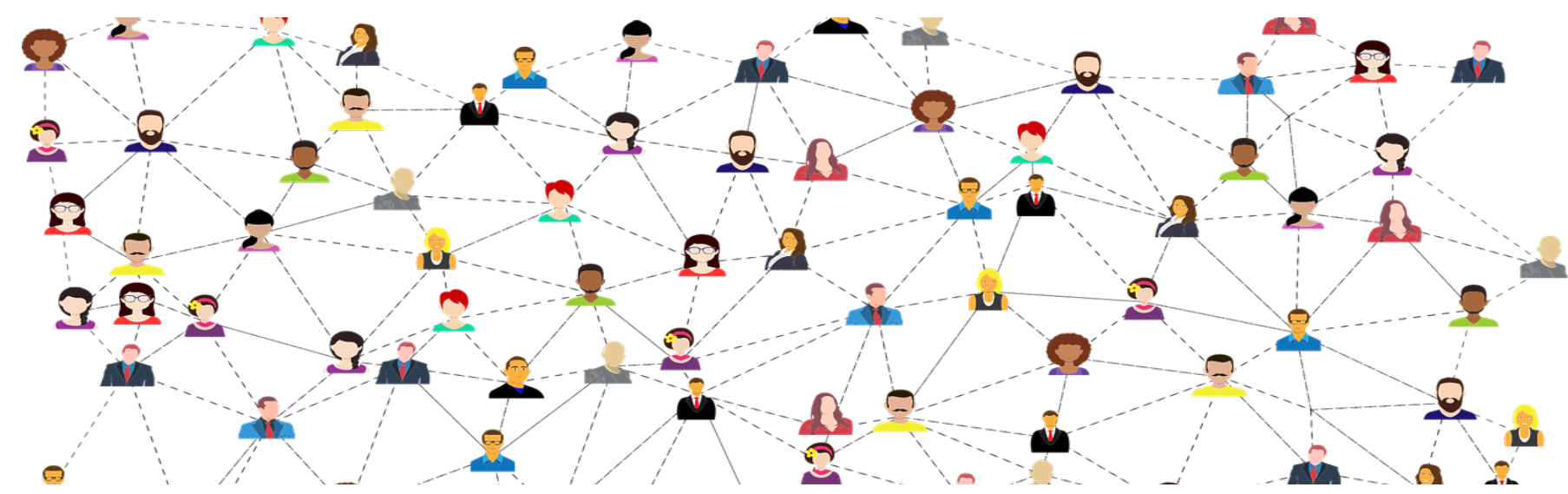
Police Officers: Stress and Decision-Making

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Introduction

The purpose of this critical appraisal was to analyze the effect of stress on decision-making and apply that research to better understand a police officer’s actions. This is an area of significance requiring further research as stress is an inevitable aspect of policing and can have a large impact on police officers’ decision-making processes (Verhage, et al., 2018).

Through further research on the role of stress in decision-making, the public can be made aware of the psychological stressors and external variables that play a role when police officers are compelled to make these rapid decisions under stress. The media often emphasizes a “focus on the negative criticism rather than positive or successful crime prevention efforts” (Dowler, 2002, p.228). In doing so, the media can criticize officer actions and present this story to the public.



Being provided with a resource, such as this critical appraisal which presented information without a link to a media organization, will ensure that there is significantly less bias in the information being shared. This study will provide the public with objective findings, as opposed to biased negativity portrayed by the media to answer the research question: **How does stress play a role in decision-making for police officers?**

Methods

This study follows the design of a critical appraisal. The applicable research was gathered through JIBC’s EBSCOHost using the inclusion and exclusion criteria shown in Table 1. The following keywords were used in the revised search which produced the 187 hits: stress OR emotion OR pressure AND decision making OR decision-making OR decision making process OR decision-making process AND police officer OR law enforcement OR cops OR police AND impact OR effect OR influence.

To select the 15 articles, the results from the search underwent a title review, abstract review, and full-text review as per the inclusion and exclusion criteria shown in Table 1. Then, the articles were assessed in terms of validity, trustworthiness, and relevance and value. Finally, the conclusions made by the research were weighed accordingly and applied to the topic of police officers to answer the research question.

Table 1
Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
English full-text scholarly peer-reviewed articles	Articles not available in English full-text and/or not scholarly peer-reviewed
Articles published between 2014-2022	Articles published prior to 2014
Articles focused on the topic of policing or police officers	Articles not focused on the topic of policing or police officers

Note. This table displays the criteria used while conducting searches to select articles.

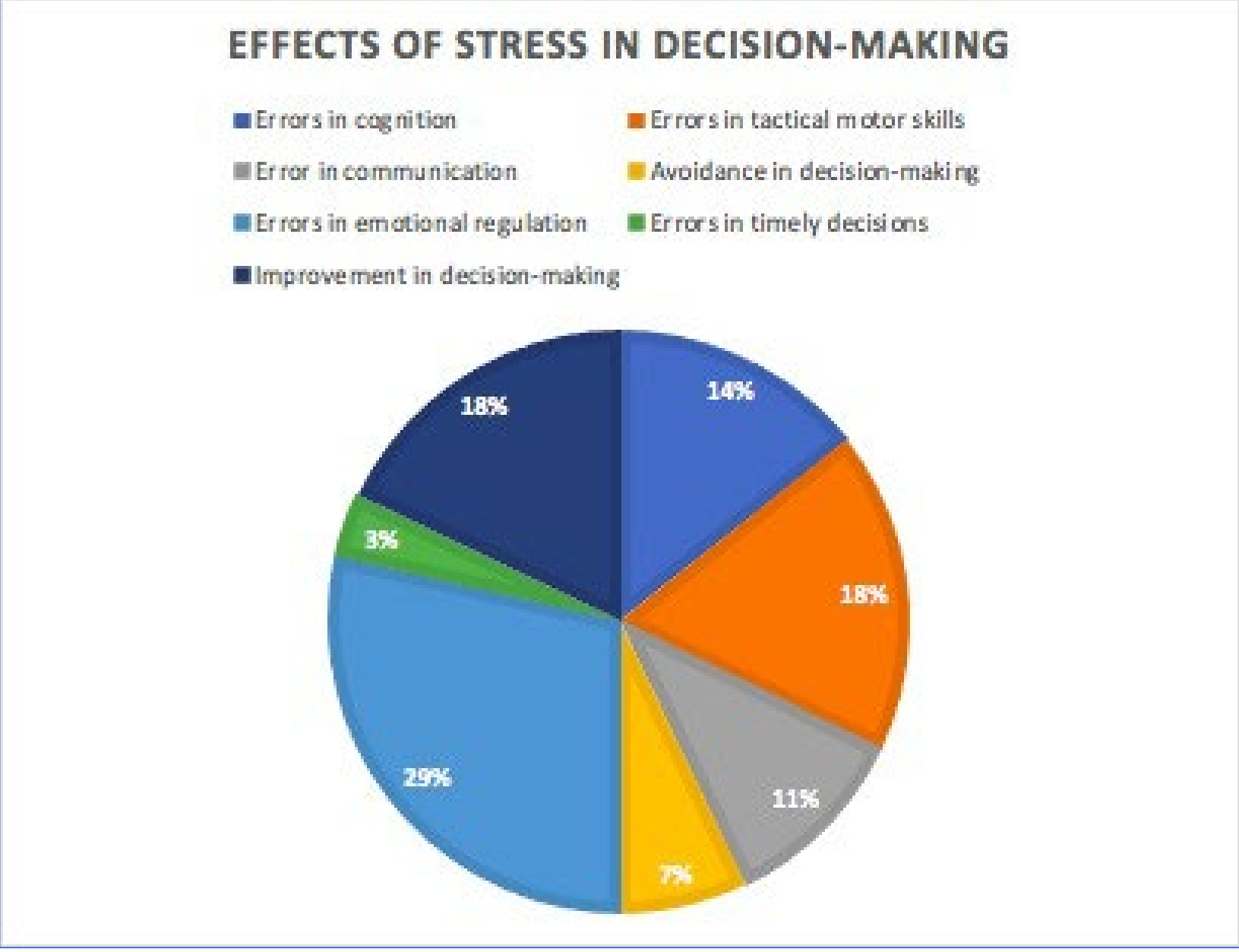
In terms of ethical considerations, this study was conducted by a student of the law enforcement field, therefore there may be a positive bias towards police officers and attempting to provide rationale for their actions.

On the contrary, being exposed to the media reports regarding cases of police brutality, could have resulted in preconceived negative biases about certain police-civilian interactions. Nonetheless, an outlined research plan was followed in recognition and attempted mitigation of these potential biases.

Results

As shown in Figure 1, the most prominent effect of stress on decision-making was error in emotional regulation (8 out of 15 articles) which alters an officer’s perception and causes them to under or overreact. Upon completion of the critical appraisal, it was found that four of the 15 articles had some issues with validity, five had issues with trustworthiness, and five had issues with relevance and value.

Figure 1
Results Pie Graph



Note. This pie graph displays the conclusions as suggested by the articles which were used for this critical appraisal.

Discussion

The most prominent effect of stress on decision-making was found to be error in emotional regulation. This claim was weighed heavily in this critical appraisal as the articles which concluded these findings were deemed to be of high relevance and value.

One of the studies concluded that the role of stress did not have a substantial impact on an officer’s ability to make *timely* decisions. However, that article was deemed to have issues with validity, and relevance and value, therefore the finding was not weighed heavily. Additionally, 18% of the findings also supported that stress helps officers make better decisions. Therefore, this is an area requiring further research as this could become a practiced skill which could be helpful for officers on the field.

Conclusion

Potential limitations of this study included issues regarding the restricted research process and time constraints. As the research design allowed for the sole inclusion of secondary sources, this research may be missing crucial findings from primary research. The time frame for the publication of selected articles was limited which may have resulted in the omission of valuable articles, and the time allotted to complete this study also limited this research. Nonetheless, this study produced the following recommendations:

1. Conduct further research on daily experiences of police officers and adapt training to prepare new recruits for those specific situations.
2. Emphasize mindfulness and self-monitoring within police departments to encourage officers to recognize emotional triggers.
3. As per Mercadillo, et al.’s (2015) findings, recruit more women into policing as research suggests they are more empathic and compassionate when dealing with civilians, therefore are likely to have skills that more suitable to perform well under stress.

References

Dowler, K. (2002). Media influence on citizen attitudes toward police effectiveness. *Policing and society*, 12(3), 227-238.

Mercadillo, R. E., Alcauter, S., Fernández-Ruiz, J. & Barrios, F. A. (2015). Police culture influences the brain function underlying compassion: A gender study. *Social neuroscience*, 10(2), 135-152.

Verhage, A., Noppe, J., Feys, Y. & Ledegen, E. (2018). Force, stress, and decision-making within the Belgian police: The impact of stressful situations on police decision-making. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, 33(4), 345-357.