

**Exploring the Risk of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Among Police Officers Investigating  
Sexual Offences Against Minors**

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**Author Note**

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**Abstract**

This research explores the mental health challenges encountered by law enforcement officers engaged in investigating sexual offenses against minors. The study delves into the prevalence and repercussions of secondary traumatic stress (STS) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among officers, examining factors such as exposure to explicit materials, empathetic stress, and the emotional toll of interacting with survivors and offenders. Secondary research was conducted where data was collected from secondary sources integrating both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic. Thematic analysis of existing qualitative studies uncovered officers' perceptions and coping mechanisms, while quantitative analysis assessed PTSD and STS prevalence and associated factors. The research identifies key stressors inherent in the investigative process, such as heavy caseloads, interagency tensions, and organizational support strategies. Additionally, the research discusses the unique emotional toll of investigating internet child exploitation cases and emphasizes the importance of supportive workplace cultures and effective coping mechanisms. Overall, the findings contribute to enhancing the effectiveness of investigations into sexual offenses against minors and promoting the well-being of law enforcement personnel in this challenging field.

*Keywords:* law enforcement officers, sexual offences, minors, mental health challenges, secondary traumatic stress, post-traumatic stress disorder, coping mechanisms, workplace support.

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### **Exploring the Risk of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Among Police Officers**

#### **Investigating Sexual Offences Against Minors**

It is widely recognized that police officers often encounter situations that are distressing, disturbing, and emotionally challenging. One specific area of policing that is becoming increasingly associated with trauma and exposes officers to significant stress is the investigation of child abuse and child protection cases (MacEachern et.al, 2011). Child sexual abuse represents a significant social issue, impacting approximately one-third of women and one-sixth of men in the US (Follette et al., 1994). Addressing sexual offenses against minors is a formidable task that places police officers in a challenging and emotionally demanding role. Child abuse investigation within police work is identified as a specific area that exposes employees to negative stress, as evident in both case law and clinical literature (Wright et al., 2006). For instance, technological progress has played a major role in the growing accessibility of child pornography and child sex tourism both within Canada and globally (Burns et al., 2008) and the spread of child sexually explicit materials have become a serious issue in the United States and worldwide (O'Brien et. Al, 2024), and it is crucial to recognize the significant toll on the mental health of law enforcement professionals investigating such crimes.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress posits that coping strategies are the cognitive and behavioral efforts individuals employ to manage the demands of stressful situations. According to the transactional model of stress and coping, stress arises from the transaction between an individual and their environment, where stressors are perceived as threatening or exceeding the individual's resources to cope. Coping strategies, categorized as either problem-focused or emotion-focused, are employed to manage the stressors and their

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associated emotions. Problem-focused coping involves addressing the stressor directly, while emotion-focused coping aims to regulate emotional distress. Using this framework, interventions can be designed to enhance officers' coping skills and reduce the impact of stressors.

### **Philosophical Worldview**

The philosophical worldview guiding this study will be pragmatism. Pragmatism perceives problems as having practical solutions that can be implemented to achieve resolution (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In the realm of exploring the risk of PTSD among police officers tasked with investigating sexual offenses against minors, a pragmatic worldview provides a robust foundation for conducting meaningful and actionable research. Pragmatism, as a philosophical stance, is inherently problem-oriented, emphasizing practical solutions to real-world issues.

### **Research Problem**

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder characterized by persistent re-experiencing of a traumatic event, avoidance of reminders of the trauma, intense feelings of fear and helplessness, and heightened vigilance following distressing events such as military combat, sexual assault, severe car accidents, or natural disasters (Widiger, 2000). According to Burns et al., (2008), research conducted with professionals in the helping field indicates that being exposed to the difficult and traumatic experiences of others can result in reactions similar to PTSD. These responses are commonly known as compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, or secondary traumatic stress (STS). Recent research acknowledges that professions involving helping roles can indirectly expose employees to traumatic events, particularly when they spend significant time listening to or reviewing evidence from victims. This has led to a focus on understanding how working with victims of traumatic events can be traumatizing for law

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enforcement agents, social workers, and therapists (Perez et al., 2010). Officers investigating these crimes are particularly at risk due to their repeated exposure to explicit evidence, empathetic stress, and the responsibility of ensuring justice for vulnerable victims. Engaging in these investigations carries emotional risks, as officers daily confront explicit materials portraying offenses against minors.

### **Research Question**

This leads us to our primary question: what are the impacts of PTSD among police officers investigating sexual offences against minors? Delving deeper, the related questions will investigate the unique characteristics of sexual offenses against minors contributing to PTSD risk, as well as existing coping mechanisms, support systems, and preventive measures available to mitigate this risk.

The purpose of this study is to critically analyze PTSD concerns of police officers investigating sexual offences against minors and identify the factors that contribute to these concerns. This study aims to uncover the unique characteristics inherent in sexual offenses against minors that contribute to the risk of PTSD among law enforcement personnel. This entails exploring various aspects such as the nature and severity of the emotional toll of interacting with victims and perpetrators, other aspects of officers' lives being affected by these investigations, and how the exposure to graphic evidence of these investigations affects the mental health of the investigators. Additionally, our research seeks to investigate the existing coping mechanisms, this involves examining the efficacy of organizational interventions, peer support programs, and psychological support services in promoting the mental well-being of officers. The findings from this study will inform the development of more effective

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interventions and programs aimed at promoting the mental health and well-being of police officers in Canada.

### Search Methodology

This study is based on secondary research, gathering data from existing sources. It employs a systematic literature review as its primary research method. A thorough search strategy was utilized across various legal and academic databases to gather relevant literature. Google Scholar, JIBC Library database and EBSCO database was mainly relied upon to discover relevant literature. All the databases offer unique coverage and specialization, aligning with the multidisciplinary nature of the research topic. A thematic analysis was employed to identify and analyze key themes emerging from the literature. To initiate the search process, a thorough identification of keywords and search terms related to the research topic was conducted. These terms were carefully selected to encompass key concepts such as "police officers," "child sexual abuse," "mental health," and "secondary traumatic stress," ensuring comprehensive coverage of the research domain. Table 1 below illustrates the literature search strategy.

**Table 1**

Database	Search Term(s)	Search Results	
<b>Initial Search</b>			
Google Scholar	PTSD among police officers investigating sexual offences against minors	20,300	
<b>Revised Searches</b>			
Google Scholar	(PTSD OR STS) AND (police officers and OR law enforcement) AND (investigating) AND (sexual offences OR sexual abuse OR crimes) AND (minors OR child OR children)	22,000	Added Synonyms



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Google Scholar	(PTSD OR STS) AND (police officers and OR law enforcement) AND (investigating) AND (sexual offences OR sexual abuse OR crimes) AND (minors OR child OR children)	1,790	Reviewed Articles
Google Scholar	(STS) AND (police officers and OR law enforcement) AND (investigating) AND (sexual offences OR sexual abuse OR crimes) AND (minors OR child OR children)	301	Omitted "PTSD"
EBSCO	(STS) AND (police officers and OR law enforcement) AND (investigating) AND (sexual offences OR sexual abuse OR crimes) AND (minors OR child OR children)	241	Reviewed Articles
Google Scholar		56	Reviewed the number of times each document was cited and selected the ones that were cited the most
Google Scholar		27	Articles that were repeatedly cited the most in other articles

**Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

Refining search strategies involved the development of Boolean-operated search strings to effectively combine keywords and optimize search results. Truncation and phrase-searching techniques were employed to broaden or narrow search parameters as needed. Execution of the search queries was carried out meticulously in each selected database, with a keen focus on reviewing search results for relevance. Advanced search options and filters provided by the databases were utilized to refine results further by the predefined criteria. Screening of titles and abstracts allowed for the identification of potentially relevant studies, which were then subjected

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to a full-text review. This comprehensive review assessed the suitability of articles for inclusion based on methodology, key findings, and alignment with the research questions. Manual searching of reference lists from relevant articles supplemented the database searches, ensuring a thorough exploration of the literature landscape.

Clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were established, delineating parameters such as publication date, study design, language, and relevance to the research focus. These criteria provided a structured framework for selecting articles and maintaining consistency throughout the search process. During the literature search process, particular criteria were defined to guarantee the relevance and suitability of the chosen studies. The inclusion criteria consisted of studies originating from Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. The main emphasis of this literature search was on academic publications released within the past 15 years. However, few sources predating this timeframe were incorporated due to their importance. The primary focus guiding the search were the mental concerns faced by police officers. Exclusion criteria employed helped to further narrow down and refine the search for relevant literature. Research on the mental health concerns of police officers in general, though used lightly in this research, was avoided in general to focus exclusively on research conducted on the mental health concerns of police officers investigating sexual crimes against minors. Studies that did not involve investigators directly participating in child exploitation investigations were excluded to maintain the focus of the research.

In the course of this research, 56 articles were reviewed, which led to using 27 articles primarily. The systematic approach to the search methodology employed in this study ensured a comprehensive and rigorous exploration of the research domain, facilitating the identification of relevant literature to address the research objectives. Each article offers valuable insights into

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different aspects of this topic, ranging from qualitative examinations of officers' perceptions and coping strategies to quantitative assessments of PTSD and STS prevalence and associated factors.

In evaluating the reliability, accuracy, and validity of sources, an approach that was adopted was to identify articles that were frequently cited by scholars in the field of law enforcement and mental health. Prioritizing sources that were widely recognized and referenced within the academic community helped to ensure that the information obtained was grounded in established research and scholarly discourse. Articles that have been highly cited typically indicate their significance and influence within the field, suggesting that they have undergone thorough peer review and scrutiny by experts.

### **Literature Review**

The literature reviewed reveals several key themes regarding the challenges faced by law enforcement personnel investigating sexual crimes against minors. The themes that have been identified have been discussed below in detail to answer the research questions of this study.

### **Gender Specific-Impact of PTSD**

One theme derived from reviewing the literature highlights the gender specific-impact of PTSD and STS. The presence of policewomen is a relatively recent development for law enforcement agencies both in the United States and internationally. Just four decades ago, the number of female officers was extremely limited (Ménard & Arter, 2014), yet, female officers were more likely to deal with sexual crimes than male officers (Brown et al., 1999).

Female officers often face increased stress from managing professional and family responsibilities, exacerbated by conflicts between traditional gender roles and job demands. This is further intensified by an unsupportive work environment and resentful social networks,

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hindering effective coping and potentially leading to PTSD symptoms (Craun et al., 2015; Ménard & Arter, 2014). This aligns with gender role theory according to Purvanova and Muros, (2010), which suggests that women are more inclined to openly express feelings of emotional and physical exhaustion as they are socialized to be expressive of their emotions. Conversely, men may tend to withdraw and suppress their emotions in response to stress, as they are taught to conceal their feelings. The ability of women to empathize and form attachments makes their work fulfilling but also emotionally draining, especially when they are expected to demonstrate these qualities at home after a day of work (Anderson, 2000; Toch, 2002).

According to Craun et al., (2015), male investigators may experience greater discomfort in engaging in physical touch, such as hugging and tickling, with their children following exposure to child exploitation cases. But at the same time, Burruss et al., (2018) noted that female officers particularly those of constable rank and those with lower levels of social support (Foley et al., 2023) tasked with investigating crimes against children often experience elevated levels of stress compared to their male counterparts, particularly if they are married and have children themselves. Contrary to common literature suggesting gender as a significant predictor, several studies have presented mixed findings regarding the association between gender and mental health among police officers. While some studies indicate that being female is linked to higher levels of PTSD and STS, there are studies suggesting that PTSD is more common in male officers, who also report higher stress levels and compassion fatigue compared to their female counterparts. Thus, the literature provides inconsistent evidence regarding the role of gender in mental health outcomes among police officers (Foley et al., 2023).

## **Impacts of Exposure to Child Sexual Exploitation Material**

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Exposure to media content related to Child Sexual Exploitation Material (CSEM) can directly and indirectly impact the likelihood of experiencing trauma and the use of coping mechanisms (Burruss et al., 2018). Law enforcement personnel handling CSEM cases are often exposed to graphic material depicting torture, rape, and child sexual abuse, which can severely affect their mental health (Wortley et al., 2014). Research indicates that exposure to CSEM can lead to negative emotional, cognitive, social, and behavioral consequences (Burns et al., 2008). High levels of emotion adversely affect cognitive functioning and one's capacity for information processing (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This exposure may result in PTSD symptoms, poor psychological well-being, generalized distrust of people, reduced interest in intimacy with partners, discomfort engaging in routine physical interaction with children, isolation from colleagues, overprotectiveness of family, and heightened awareness of child exploitation (Bourke & Craun, 2014; Burns et al., 2008; Perez et al., 2010). Physical reactions reported by investigators include headaches, mood swings, severe tiredness, sleep deprivation, and numbness (Burns et al., 2008). Law enforcement officers involved in CSEM cases often score significantly higher on PTSD scales compared to non-CSEM-exposed peers, experiencing intrusive imagery, hypervigilance, and moodiness (Burns et al., 2008; Perez et al., 2010). Unlike therapists who often deal with narrative recollections, police officers are directly exposed to graphic images and audio that vividly portray the suffering and victimization of minors. This exposure triggers empathetic stress and vicarious trauma, exacerbating the risk of PTSD among investigators (Burns et al., 2008). Some investigators exhibit resilience to the deleterious effects of CSEM exposure (Burns et al., 2008), which has been minimally explored in existing literature. Previous work has highlighted the role of organizational structures, such as officer wellness programs, in fostering resilience and wellness among investigators handling disturbing crimes (Powell et al.,

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2013). However, there remains uncertainty about how individual investigators perceive their CSEM exposure and its association with their well-being (O'Brien et al., 2024).

### **“Stress” in Policing**

Policing, by its very nature, is acknowledged to be inherently stressful, with little opportunity to prevent police officers' exposure to traumatic events (Foley et al., 2024). Numerous studies have explored the concept of “stress” in policing, examining both organizational stressors like burnout, high workloads, lack of support from superiors, and shift work, as well as occupational stressors such as exposure to trauma (Ménard & Arter, 2014). While all roles within policing come with their own complexities, those involving child abuse and sexual offenses are widely acknowledged as some of the most stressful and high-risk roles within law enforcement (Brown et al., 1999). According to Follette et al., (1994), law enforcement professionals have a higher risk of psychological injury from exposure to traumatic case materials than mental health professionals.

However, exposure to traumatic material is not the sole source of negative stress experienced by child abuse investigators (Wright et al., 2006; Powell et al., 2013). Contradicting the notion that investigating sexual crimes against minors is inherently stressful, Powell et al., (2014) highlight the impact of workplace relationships, workload, resources, and physical environment on investigators' stress levels during Internet Child Exploitation (ICE) investigations. Similarly, Powell et al., (2013) suggest that distress among child abuse investigators is primarily attributed to workplace climate rather than exposure to detailed case material. The process of investigating and prosecuting child abuse is inherently complex and demanding. Specifically, child abuse investigation is characterized by heavy caseloads, short deadlines, and high staff turnover. This high workload can consequently lead to additional

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organizational challenges, such as inadequate supervisory support (Anderson, 2000). The main stressors identified include heavy caseloads, tensions stemming from interagency collaboration, and management's lack of recognition of the specialized skills required for their role (Powell et al., 2013; Toch, 2002).

According to Powell et al., (2013), the Job-Demands Resources model, employees encounter occupation-specific aspects categorized as either job resources or job demands. Job resources are beneficial factors that motivate employees and contribute to achieving work goals. Conversely, job demands are contextual stressors that deplete well-being if the physical or psychological energy required to cope exceeds the employees' energy level. Job resources serve to counterbalance the negative effects of job demands, which becomes particularly important when tasks are highly demanding in terms of workload and emotional strain. Burns et al., (2008) suggest that in the model, child sex abuse case content might not have been included as a stressor because it was viewed as a challenging aspect rather than a source of distress. Employees may find satisfaction in the notion of protecting children, which in turn enhances their resilience.

### **Applicability of Coping Mechanisms**

Over an extended period, continuous exposure to human suffering can disrupt regular coping mechanisms, elevating the likelihood of law enforcement officers developing secondary traumatic stress (Burns et al., 2008; O'Brien et al., 2024). Aside from critical incidents and social stressors, coping strategies play a pivotal role in how police officers respond to and manage stress (Ménard & Arter, 2014). Several factors contribute to investigators' ability to cope with their work. These include personal attributes such as being well-suited for the job and having adequate training and experience, which provides a foundation for learning and decision-making in investigations. Effective supervision, particularly from managers who understand the

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impact of such work, is also crucial for providing support (Burns et al., 2008). Humor was considered a valuable strategy for alleviating work stress and fostering a light-hearted atmosphere among team members. Although outsiders might view dark humor as inappropriate, participants stressed that it was never intended to be derogatory or to trivialize the experiences of child victims (Wright et al., 2006). However, according to Craun & Bourke (2015), the use of humor targeting victims was identified as a warning sign, suggesting that individuals exhibiting this behavior had notably higher STS scores compared to those who did not engage in such humor. According to Bourke and Craun (2014), while coping strategies such as reinterpreting events positively or planning a way out of stress may seem benign, the identification of denial as a risk factor for heightened STS underscores the complexity of coping in traumatic contexts. Alcohol was cited as one of the primary coping strategies of police officers in dealing with work-related stressors (Violanti et al., 2011). While certain officers employ adaptive coping mechanisms like exercise to manage stress, others resort to maladaptive strategies such as dissociation, suppression, and avoidance behaviors, which can potentially exacerbate issues (Ménard & Arter, 2014).

### **Burnout and Empathy**

Burnout is the feeling of, “being at the end of one’s rope”. Burnout is described as feeling emotionally exhausted and overwhelmed, often occurring due to prolonged work stress. This phenomenon is prevalent in occupations involving frequent and emotionally charged interactions with customers, clients, or patients (Perez et al., 2010). However, research has shown that burnout among investigators is influenced by both individual and organizational factors (Anderson, 2000). Investigating child exploitation cases involves not only probing cases of child rape and torture but frequently witnessing these acts firsthand as part of the investigation process



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(Burns et al., 2008). Empathy for suffering, rather than exposure, emerges as the primary source of stress for investigators (Kleineidam & Fischbach, 2024). Child pornography case examiners report high levels of burnout and exhaustion (Burns et al., 2008; Perez et al., 2010). Oxburgh et al., (2015) highlights the varying levels of empathy officers believe they would employ during interviews based on the type of offense, with a notable increase in empathy reported for murder cases compared to rape cases. Kleineidam & Fischbach, (2024) investigated the correlation between empathy for suffering and burnout, as well as PTSD among investigators involved in internet child exploitation cases drawing from the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model. The findings suggest that, beyond mere exposure, empathy for suffering is positively associated with both PTSD and burnout among investigators handling internet child exploitation cases. It was found that empathy has a stronger impact on the investigators compared to exposure to child pornographic material. This challenges previous research focusing solely on exposure and states that empathy for victims' suffering acts as the primary stressor for investigators, in line with the JD-R model.

## Findings

### Burnout and Trauma

Perez et al., (2010), quantitatively evaluated the relationship between burnout and trauma levels among employees obligated to view disturbing evidence. The findings reveal significant rates of burnout, with many individuals at risk for PTSD. Specifically, exhaustion and cynicism levels were notably elevated. Moreover, the duration of exposure to disturbing media was found to correlate with the experience of burnout and PTSD. Kleineidam & Fischbach (2024), revealed in their study that there was no significant moderation effect between empathy for suffering and burnout dimensions. They suggested that burnout causes the development of PTSD, and not vice

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versa. This indicates that burnout plays a pivotal role in contributing to PTSD among law enforcement officials in the field of investigating sexual offences against minors.

### **Effect on Personal Lives**

Burns et al., (2008) revealed profound effects on the personal lives of investigators due to their exposure to disturbing evidence. Research suggests that investigators experienced both physical and emotional reactions, such as headaches, fluctuating moods, and extreme fatigue, which often hinder their engagement in normal activities outside of work. They also expressed feelings of inadequacy in fulfilling their responsibilities to families and friends. Investigators exposed to particularly distressing images reported experiencing nightmares and flashbacks. Moreover, the exposure to this work heightened investigators' protectiveness of children, leading to behaviors such as constant vigilance around children and a strong urge to educate parents and children about internet safety. Consequently, they became more restrictive of their own children's activities due to heightened fears stemming from their work experiences. According to Perez et al., (2010) the investigation of such disturbing material can significantly impact officers' relationships with spouses, leading to a loss of sexual desire and strained intimacy between partners. Additionally, conflicts may arise within marital relationships, with some spouses expressing jealousy or anger towards the officers' work. Moreover, officers' heightened protectiveness towards children may manifest as increased vigilance and restrictions on their activities, reflecting the complex interplay between work-related stressors and familial dynamics. These findings explain how investigating sexual crimes against minors can affect an investigator's personal life.

### **Organizational Factors**

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Organizational factors significantly contribute to PTSD concerns among investigators tasked with probing sexual offences against minors (Powell et al., 2013). According to Wright et al., (2006), though the distressing contents of children's disclosures were acknowledged, they were not perceived as a significant source of negative stress. However, heavy caseloads (Powell et al., 2013) emerged as a major stressor for the majority of investigators, potentially compromising the quality of investigations due to time constraints and limited resources for training and supervision. Despite lacking objective evidence of work impediments, investigators frequently reported feelings of guilt and resentment associated with workload prioritization and perceived undervaluation of child abuse work. Additionally, the necessity for close collaboration with other professionals during investigations was identified as another significant stressor. These organizational challenges highlight the complex dynamics contributing to PTSD concerns among investigators in this field. The bureaucratic nature of most police organizations is also a known source of stress for officers (Burruss et al., 2018). The work setting, particularly its organizational structure and management, also contributes to the job stress (Powell et al., 2013; Anderson, 2000). These findings provide crucial insights how organizational dynamics contribute to PTSD concerns among investigators, thus addressing key aspects of the research questions regarding the sources of stress and trauma experienced in this field.

### **Lack of Understanding**

"Lack of understanding" emerged as a prevalent finding among investigators probing sexual offences against minors, significantly impacting their ability to effectively address the challenges posed by such investigations. According to Burns et al. (2008), team members reported feeling misunderstood by society, leading to inadequate responses, insufficient funding, and procedural constraints that hindered their efforts to locate and rescue exploited children.

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Moreover, a lack of comprehension from the Criminal Justice System resulted in outdated procedural requirements and minimal punishments for accused offenders, prolonging investigations and allowing perpetrators to continue their crimes. Within the police universe, suboptimal decisions regarding ICE teams were attributed to a lack of understanding, encompassing issues such as candidate selection, office environment, funding, and supervision. This lack of understanding not only exacerbates investigators' frustration but also poses substantial challenges to their ability to cope with the demands of their work. By highlighting the pervasive impact of a lack of understanding, these findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive reforms to enhance support systems and streamline investigative processes in addressing sexual offences against minors.

### **Effect of Investigations on the Investigators**

Oxburgh et al., (2015) reveal that police officers rate interviews with murderers, particularly suspects of child murder, as the most stressful aspect of their investigative duties. This pattern persists across different types of cases, with child cases consistently rated as more emotionally impactful, especially for officers with children of their own. These insights underscore the significant emotional toll of investigating crimes involving children and highlight the importance of specialized training and ongoing support for officers engaged in such cases. The data aligns with the research questions by providing empirical evidence of the heightened stress levels associated with child-related investigations, thereby emphasizing the need for tailored interventions to mitigate the psychological impact on law enforcement personnel.

### **Social Support**

Investigators viewed fellow police officers as a less intimidating avenue for debriefing, appreciating their firsthand understanding of the stresses involved in such investigations.

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Colleagues offered advice based on shared experiences, normalizing emotional reactions and providing practical support, such as sharing caseloads during times of increased stress to prevent overwhelming workloads (Wright et al., 2006). Many investigators sought support from individuals outside the ICE team, including spouses, family, and friends, to share emotions and experiences, and to engage in recreational activities together. Feeling connected and supported by others outside of work was highly valued (Burns et al., 2008). But according to Bell et al., (2003), Group support can present certain drawbacks and these include the risk of "groupthink" and conformity, as well as the potential for members to distance themselves and engage in victim-blaming as a defense mechanism when hearing about a coworker's distress. Conflicting roles within agency-held groups, such as supervisors serving as both supporters and evaluators or coworker-supervisors who are also friends, can pose challenges. Additionally, group members may experience increased distress from the need to hear each other's traumatic stories. These potential drawbacks highlight the complexities involved in seeking and providing support within the investigative community, suggesting the need for a nuanced approach to coping strategies.

### **Coping Mechanisms**

Many investigators admitted hesitance toward seeking formal psychological counseling due to the stigma associated with mental health services, perceiving it as a sign of inability to cope. Additionally, they feared negative repercussions on their work record from visits to a psychologist, despite knowing the service was supposed to be confidential (Wright et al., 2006). Anderson (2000), highlights how active coping strategies of problem-solving and cognitive restructuring were used more than social support and expressing emotions. The findings from the study do highlight the relationship between the levels of burnout and the coping mechanisms used. Alcohol was cited as one of the primary coping strategies of police officers in dealing with

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work-related stressors (Violanti et al., 2011). These findings suggest maladaptive coping behaviors prevalent among police officers, which can contribute to burnout and other negative outcomes that must be addressed carefully and immediately.

### **Discussion**

The investigation of sexual crimes against minors poses significant challenges for law enforcement personnel, as evidenced by the comprehensive research conducted in this study.

One significant revelation is the profound emotional toll of exposure to explicit materials depicting crimes against children, particularly in internet child exploitation cases. Unlike therapists who often deal with narrative recollections, police officers are directly exposed to graphic images and audio that vividly portray the suffering and victimization of minors. This exposure triggers empathetic stress and vicarious trauma, exacerbating the risk of PTSD and STS among investigators. Consequently, there arises a critical need for tailored interventions and support systems that acknowledge the unique nature of this exposure and its impact on officers' mental well-being (Burns et al., 2008). Many studies in clinical literature provide evidence of the exposure to trauma experienced by various professionals, which is associated with symptoms related to PTSD. However, there is a lack of research examining the impact of PTSD specifically on police personnel who are involved in investigating cases of child abuse and child protection (MacEachern et.al, 2011).

Gender-specific impact of PTSD and STS among law enforcement officers investigating sexual crimes against minors is another important area in this study. The presence of policewomen in such roles has increased over the years, exposing them to the emotional toll of dealing with these sensitive cases. Female officers often face heightened stress due to the

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balancing act between professional duties and familial responsibilities, compounded by societal expectations regarding gender roles. It's essential to recognize that societal expectations and gender roles may influence how male and female officers experience and express stress. While female officers may be more inclined to openly express emotional exhaustion due to societal norms encouraging emotional expression, male officers may face challenges in acknowledging and seeking help for their mental health struggles due to perceived expectations of emotional stoicism. However, conflicting findings regarding the association between gender and mental health outcomes among officers underscore the complexity of this issue. And this requires for gender-specific interventions and support systems tailored to the unique needs of male and female officers. Such interventions could include targeted training programs, peer support groups, and mental health resources designed to address the specific stressors and coping mechanisms associated with investigating sexual crimes against minors. Additionally, further research is warranted to better understand the gender-specific impact of PTSD and STS in law enforcement and to develop evidence-based interventions that promote the well-being of all officers involved in these challenging roles. Ultimately, by acknowledging and addressing the gender-specific aspects of stress and trauma in law enforcement, agencies can better support their personnel and enhance their overall effectiveness in addressing crimes against minors.

Exposure to Child Sexual Exploitation Material (CSEM) emerges as a significant factor contributing to the mental health challenges faced by investigators. The graphic nature of the material depicting abuse and torture can lead to profound emotional, cognitive, and behavioral consequences. This exposure not only triggers PTSD symptoms but also affects investigators' personal lives, leading to physical and emotional reactions that hinder their engagement in normal activities. The heightened protectiveness towards children reflects the psychological

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impact of exposure to distressing material, highlighting the need for effective coping mechanisms and support systems. Strained relationships with one's family and friends also lead to burnout being caused, which thereby causes symptoms of PTSD.

The emotional toll of investigating sexual crimes against minors is evident in the profound effects on investigators' personal lives. Strained relationships, loss of sexual desire, and heightened protectiveness towards children reflect the complex interplay between work-related stressors and familial dynamics. These findings highlight the need for targeted interventions to mitigate the impact of investigations on investigators' well-being, emphasizing the importance of tailored support systems and coping mechanisms.

While social support from colleagues and external networks can be beneficial for investigators, it also presents certain drawbacks, such as the risk of "groupthink" and victim-blaming. Balancing the benefits of social support with potential drawbacks requires a nuanced approach that fosters a supportive and inclusive environment while addressing potential challenges. The hesitance towards seeking formal psychological counseling and the prevalence of maladaptive coping behaviors underscore the need for comprehensive support systems that address the stigma associated with mental health services. The reliance on alcohol as a coping strategy highlights the need for targeted interventions to promote adaptive coping behaviors among law enforcement personnel as this was a finding repeatedly prevalent in a few articles.

The findings regarding the benefits and drawbacks of social support, as well as the hesitance towards seeking formal psychological counseling and reliance on maladaptive coping behaviors, underscore the urgent need for comprehensive support systems tailored to the unique needs of law enforcement personnel investigating sexual crimes against minors. It is essential to create an environment where seeking help for mental health concerns is encouraged and



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destigmatized. This can be achieved through targeted interventions that provide education, resources, and access to confidential support services. Additionally, efforts should be made to promote adaptive coping strategies and reduce reliance on alcohol or other harmful behaviors. By addressing these challenges proactively, law enforcement agencies can better support the well-being and resilience of their personnel, ultimately enhancing their ability to effectively carry out their critical duties.

The inherent stress of policing, compounded by the demands of investigating sexual crimes against minors, underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of stressors in law enforcement. While exposure to traumatic material is acknowledged as a significant stressor, organizational factors such as heavy caseloads and inadequate support also contribute to investigators' stress levels. This aligns with the Job-Demands Resources model, which emphasizes the importance of balancing job demands with resources to mitigate the negative effects of stress (Powell et al., 2013). The findings challenge the notion that exposure to disturbing material is the sole source of stress, emphasizing the role of workplace climate and organizational dynamics. The revelation that exposure to traumatic material is not the sole source of stress among investigators probing sexual crimes against minors highlights the complexity of stressors in law enforcement. This finding underscores the necessity for further research to explore the full spectrum of stressors faced by investigators and their implications for mental health. This finding emphasized how organizational factors can be major stressors than the exposure to evidence itself and emphasis should be placed on investigating the impact of heavy caseloads and organizational-related stressors, such as inadequate support and bureaucratic constraints, on investigators' well-being.

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The pervasive lack of understanding from society, the Criminal Justice System, and the police leads to inadequate responses, procedural constraints, and suboptimal decision-making, hindering effective investigations. Addressing this lack of understanding requires comprehensive reforms to enhance support systems and streamline investigative processes, emphasizing the need for a collaborative approach involving multiple stakeholders.

### **Recommendations**

Firstly, there is a pressing need for longitudinal studies that track the mental health trajectories of police officers engaged in child sexual abuse investigations over time. Longitudinal research designs would enable researchers to capture the dynamic nature of stressors, coping mechanisms, and psychological outcomes experienced by officers, providing a detailed understanding of the long-term impacts of their work.

Furthermore, future research should explore the efficacy of organizational interventions and support strategies aimed at enhancing the well-being of police officers in this field. This could involve the implementation and evaluation of evidence-based interventions such as peer support programs, resilience training, and mental health screening protocols tailored to the unique needs of investigators working on sexual offenses against minors.

Future research should prioritize investigating the role of sleep quality and duration in relation to PTSD development. Assessing the contemporaneous and lagged effects of sleep on PTSD can provide valuable insights into the bidirectional relationship between sleep problems and PTSD, potentially uncovering opportunities for sleep interventions as a protective factor against PTSD. Moreover, there is a need to explore additional coping mechanisms, such as humor and religion, to understand their efficacy in mitigating PTSD among officers. There is also a need for interdisciplinary collaboration between law enforcement agencies, mental health

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professionals, and academic researchers to develop comprehensive frameworks for preventing and addressing PTSD and STS among police officers. Collaborative efforts could involve the co-creation of trauma-informed policies, protocols, and training programs that prioritize officer well-being while optimizing investigative outcomes.

Additionally, efforts should be made to develop tailored interventions that address the unique stressors faced by law enforcement personnel, including heavy caseloads and organizational factors. Moreover, community engagement and awareness initiatives are essential to destigmatize discussions surrounding mental health challenges in law enforcement and foster a culture of support and understanding.

One notable limitation in exploring the risk of PTSD among police officers investigating sexual offenses against minors is the potential underreporting or lack of representation of mental health challenges. The stigma surrounding mental health within the law enforcement culture may contribute to officers' reluctance to disclose or seek help for PTSD symptoms. This stigma could result in an incomplete picture of the true prevalence and impact of PTSD in this population. Moreover, the demanding nature of police work, including long hours, exposure to high-stress situations, and limited access to mental health resources, may exacerbate officers' reluctance to acknowledge or address their mental health needs. Additionally, the inherent variability in officers' experiences and coping mechanisms may lead to heterogeneous responses to traumatic events, further complicating efforts to accurately assess the prevalence of PTSD in this population. Furthermore, methodological limitations in existing research, such as reliance on self-report measures and cross-sectional study designs, may introduce bias and confound results, potentially leading to an overestimation or underestimation of PTSD prevalence rates. These

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limitations underscore the need for further research employing strong methodologies and addressing systemic barriers to mental health support within the law enforcement community.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the comprehensive exploration of mental health challenges among law enforcement officers investigating sexual offenses against minors underscores the gravity and complexity of this critical issue. Through an exhaustive literature research employing rigorous search methodologies, scholarly insights have offered profound implications for both research and practice in the field of law enforcement and victim advocacy.

The contradictory views regarding the primary sources of stress highlight the detailed nature of officers' experiences and underscore the need for targeted interventions tailored to their unique challenges and coping mechanisms. This study not only provides a comprehensive foundation for further inquiry but also advocates for evidence-based approaches to address the mental health needs of law enforcement personnel effectively.

Furthermore, the identification of knowledge gaps and recommendations for future research underscores the ongoing imperative to advance our understanding of this critical issue and develop innovative strategies to support officers' resilience and well-being in the face of traumatic experiences. Ultimately, this paper serves as a call to action for policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and mental health professionals to prioritize the mental health and well-being of officers engaged in the investigation of sexual offenses against minors. By fostering a culture of support, resilience, and collaboration, we can mitigate the adverse effects of trauma exposure and promote the long-term psychological health and professional efficacy of those dedicated to safeguarding our communities' most vulnerable members.

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This research encapsulates the significance of the research findings and provides a compelling call to action for addressing the mental health challenges faced by law enforcement officers in this critical domain.

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