

1-1-2018

# Millennial Generation Law Enforcement Academy Recruits and Their Perception of Mental Health

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Running head: MILLENNIAL GENERATION LAW ENFORCEMENT

**Nova Southeastern University  
College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences  
Department of Justice and Human Services**

Millennial Generation Law Enforcement Academy  
Recruits and Their Perception of Mental Health.

by  
Jeffrey M. McGill  
A Dissertation Presented to the  
Department of Justice and Human Services  
of Nova Southeastern University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
**Doctor of Philosophy**

Nova Southeastern University  
2018

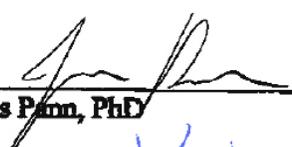
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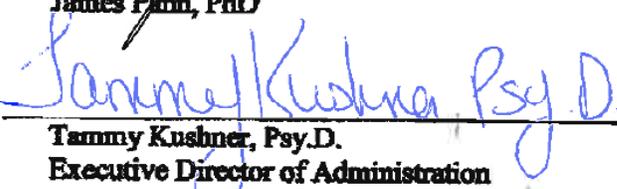
Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by, Jeffrey M. McGill, under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Department of Justice and Human Services and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Nova Southeastern University.

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### **Acknowledgments**

The dissertation process is not a journey that can be accomplished by a single individual and indeed was not accomplished by me alone. With that in mind, I would be remiss if I did not take the time to acknowledge the efforts put forth and sacrifices that were made by many as I completed this task.

First, my committee whom I owe a great debt. Dr. Tina Jaeckle who not only took a risk by lending her reputation to a law enforcement officer who with very little planning or notice decided to earn a Ph.D. While I found myself on the bridge to nowhere on occasion, Dr. Jaeckle never wavered in her efforts to see that I got back on track. Dr. Marcelo Castro who extended an interview to me despite my application not checking all the blocks. Dr. James Pann who agreed to provide his expertise to a student who had struggled through his class.

Second, the study's sample participants who were willing to discuss such a taboo subject with me. Without their investment of time and confidence that this study could one day improve law enforcement culture, no progress would have been made. The sample provided an insight that could change the culture and save the lives of their peers.

Last my family who watched me come home from regular work only to do homework until bedtime for many years. My parents worked hard for everything they earned and set an example I hope to live up to. My wife supported me through the ups and downs and my kids who unknowingly motivate me to strive for self-improvement.

# MILLENNIAL GENERATION LAW ENFORCEMENT

# MILLENNIAL GENERATION LAW ENFORCEMENT

## **Abstract**

Millennial Generation Law Enforcement Academy Recruits and Their Perception of Mental Health. Jeffrey M. McGill 2018: Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Justice and Human Services. Descriptors: Millennial Generation, Law Enforcement, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Suicide, Stress,

The traumatic and cumulative stresses associated with a law enforcement career are well documented both empirically and anecdotally. While previous generations have acknowledged and coped with these stressors with varying levels of success, research shows that the millennial generation has reported more mental health issues than any generation in history. Since suicide is the single leading cause of death for United States law enforcement officers in recent years, addressing mental health should be a priority of all agencies. The introduction of millennial generation law enforcement officers creates the potential for increased mental health needs within the field. 25 millennial-aged Florida law enforcement academy recruits were interviewed in an effort to develop an understanding of their perception of mental health and suicide within the law enforcement career field. Developing an understanding of the perceptions of mental health and suicide from the perspective of millennial generation recruit officers offers insight into this birth cohort. This insight can begin to identify practices and procedures that have the potential to reduce the stigma associated with mental health and ultimately reduce the number of officer suicides. This study identifies training and policy needs which can be adopted by law enforcement agencies to mitigate mental health concerns. Additionally, this study offers suggestion for future research which may change police culture and its perceptions on mental health and suicide.

**Table of Contents**

	Page
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	3
Background .....	3
Problem Statement .....	4
Dissertation Goal .....	6
Relevance and Significance .....	7
Barriers and Issues .....	9
Definition of Terms.....	10
Summary .....	11
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	12
Introduction.....	12
The Millennial Generation.....	13
First Responders and Mental Health .....	17
Law Enforcement Culture.....	19
Stress .....	22
Suicide.....	27
Mitigation.....	29
Family Members and Peers.....	33
Summary .....	35
Research Questions.....	35
Chapter 3: Methodology .....	38
Research Method .....	38
Participants.....	39
Participant Selection .....	40
Instruments.....	41
Procedures.....	41
Data Analysis .....	42
Summary .....	43
Chapter 4: Findings.....	44
Introduction.....	44
Demographic Data .....	44
Interview Questions .....	44
Theme Overview.....	58
Chapter 5: Discussion .....	63
Introduction.....	63
Interpretation.....	64
Context.....	67
Implications.....	68
Limitations .....	73
Future Direction .....	77

Summary .....79

References .....80

Appendices

    A Demographic Data .....89

    B Interview Questionnaire .....91

Tables

    1 Demographic Results .....93

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Background**

While suicide is not the only manifestation of mental health issues; it is certainly one of the most prominent. Law enforcement officers are subjected to multiple physical and psychological tests and are in general considered a higher functioning segment of society (Stanley, Hom, & Joiner, 2016). It is then expected that the rate of suicide within the law enforcement community would be notably lower than is seen in the public, but this is not the case. Despite the screening process and the expectation that law enforcement officers are more mentally stable than members of the public, suicide remains the single greatest cause of death for law enforcement officers each year (O'Hara, Violanti, Levenson, & Clark, 2012).

It is believed that the suicide rate for law enforcement officer lies somewhere between 16 and 18 per 100,000 officers (Clark, White, & Violanti, 2012). To place this in perspective, in 2012, 133 law enforcement officers died as a result of a combination of accidents, felonious assaults, and motor vehicle accidents. During the same year, at least 126 law enforcement officers completed suicide (O'Hara et al., 2012).

Suicide has long been a taboo subject in the United States, but even more so within a career field that attracts Type A personalities that pride themselves on being able to control complete chaos (Collins & Gibbs, 2003). Traumatic and cumulative stress management is just recently becoming a topic of discussion among law enforcement officers, but in some cases, officers seeking mental health assistance find themselves choosing between their career and their psychological well-being (Heffren & Hausdorf, 2016).

Addressing the issue of psychological health within the law enforcement community should begin in the basic recruit academy if we hope to see a significant change in how agencies address long-term mental health for their employees. The benefits of education and training to reduce the stigma associated with mental health treatment is evident (Corrigan, Morris, Michaels, Rafacz, & Rüsich, 2012). It is, therefore possible, that an early introduction to the mental health concerns that face law enforcement officers will assist in limiting the stigma associated with mental health issues. Law enforcement officers are in “need and are themselves deserving of protection and saving in all domains spanning both physical and psychological health” (Stanley et al., 2016, p. 26).

While there is likely to be continued resistance from some current agency administrations in addressing these issues as a result of existing culture, within a few generations, agencies will have command-level officers who first learned about mental health issues and management skills while in basic recruit academy and consider it part of the norm. These officers are likely to be more comfortable addressing mental health concerns due to a change in culture and are more likely to adopt a policy that reflects these needs.

### **Problem Statement**

Formal police academies have existed in the United States for over fifty years, and while the class titles and number of hours required to complete these programs have varied, the manner in which this training is delivered and focus on the curriculum has remained relatively unchanged. Taught primarily by senior or retired law enforcement officers with a variety of professional and academic credentialing the exact content of the

training is often just as diverse. Legal, Defensive Tactics, Firearms, Communication, and Criminal Investigations are just a few of the courses required to complete the 770 clock hours required by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement Basic Recruit Training Program (Florida Department of Education, 2016). While basic outlines are provided for each course, it is up to the individual instructor to determine what topics receive more or less coverage. Each block of instruction is intended to provide new law enforcement officers with the essential knowledge and skills needed to enter and survive a twenty-five plus year career addressing crime issues in the city, county, and state agencies across Florida. The basic recruit academy is the foundation from which all future advanced and specialized training is built throughout an officer's career.

Significant improvements have been made in the areas of officer survival with the adoption of better training, tactics, equipment, and medical advances. Each of these advances is addressed within the basic recruit and advanced officer training courses nationwide. These modifications have resulted in the ten-year average number of police officers killed in the line of duty falling from a high of 241 per year in the 1920's to the current rate of 146 officers per year (National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, 2016).

The same improvements have not been made in addressing law enforcement mental health issues. While the rates of suicide within the career field is often subject to debate, none of the research suggests a 39% decrease in suicide like has been seen in the other causes of in the line of duty deaths. Additionally, it is estimated that the lifetime prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder among first responders is as high as 32% (Walker, McKune, Ferguson, Pyne, & Rattray, 2016).

Basic Recruit Academy instructors vary in their ability and desire to discuss mental health, stress management, and suicide due to the associated stigma and whether or not they have experience in these areas. Reflective of the culture, the Florida Law Enforcement Basic Recruit Curriculum, having a combined text length of 910 pages dedicated only 2.5 pages of material toward stress and mental health within law enforcement (Florida Department of Law Enforcement, 2016, p.199-201). This same curriculum dedicates 9.5 pages to teach officers how to respond to and manage mental health issues within the community they serve (Florida Department of Law Enforcement, 2016, p.130-132 & 136-141).

### **Dissertation Goal**

The purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of millennial age law enforcement recruit academy students, as it relates to their perception of the prevalence, stigma, and prevention needs associated with mental health issues within the law enforcement career field. The millennial generation, born between 1982 and 2002, (Elam, Stratton, & Gibson, 2007) has reported more mental health problems than any other previous generation (Watkins, Hunt, & Eisenberg, 2012; Twenge et al., 2010). Since this generation is now entering law enforcement service, there is a concern for their long-term mental health and ability to successfully manage occupational stressors throughout an entire career. The goal of this research is to develop an understanding of the mental health and suicide issues that influence law enforcement as a result of perceived stigma, stress, and support systems. Specifically, this research will look at the perceptions of new millennial law enforcement trainees who have not yet been fully socialized into the career field.

**Relevance and Significance**

This study addresses the perceptions of millennial-aged law enforcement academy recruits about mental health within the career field. With a significant number of millennials entering the workforce, it is likely that change will be seen in both mental health needs as well as potential suicide increases. While this information will be initially beneficial to the recruit in training, those who are likely to benefit from these findings include a much more diverse group.

First, law enforcement officers, administrators, and trainers across the country would benefit from this research. Department location or size does not limit the potential for stress associated with the nature of law enforcement work or officer suicide (Violanti, 1995). Therefore, all agencies and law enforcement training centers could use the results to determine if their training curriculum and policy are making a positive impact on their officers. Members of international law enforcement agencies may also obtain some benefits, but cultural differences as well as police stressors vary by country and, therefore, results must be considered in context, or the research must be localized to address these disparities.

Second, based on research findings we may identify some consistencies present among all first responders (Fire, EMS, and Dispatch) due to the similar personality types who are drawn to these lines of work and the type of stressors present in each field. The millennial generation is entering each of these career fields currently, and their perceptions of mental health should be considered as agencies develop training and policy. While there is not a direct training connection between these fields, the finding that there is an instructional deficiency in the law enforcement field may assist with

identifying similar psychological training shortfall in other first responder career fields. This may lead to the development and adoption of new curriculum to address these concerns in each of the first responder fields.

Finally, the community as a whole may benefit from this research if it results in any changes in training that improve a law enforcement officer's mental fitness for duty and reduce law enforcement suicide rates if for no other reason than financial costs associated with hiring and training new officers. It is reported by some agencies that the cost to recruit, hire, equip, and train a new law enforcement officer may exceed \$100,000 (Meade, 2016). Millennial generation officers will be in the career field for the near future in most law enforcement agencies and therefore the most likely to have direct contact with the public. With increased training cost and demands on law enforcement agencies, identifying the needs of millennial generation officers as it relates to mental health and addressing these needs up front will ultimately reduce costs for mental health treatment and lower employee turnover associated with mental health issues. Additionally, officers who are better prepared for the stresses of a law enforcement career are likely to make better decisions while working in the community (Gutshall, Hampton, Sebetan, Stein, & Broxtermann, 2017).

A clear understanding of the needs of millennial law enforcement officers should allow further development of training initiatives and agency policy to reduce mental health issues, improve stress management, and ultimately decrease suicide rates within the career field. We know that new law enforcement training recruits are usually young and more easily influenced during their early years of training and employment (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010).

Since most Florida law enforcement academies last a minimum of 19 weeks, identifying a training shortfall in mental health and addressing the deficit early in the officer career by developing appropriate curriculum will likely lead to a good foundation from which the basics of stress management and mental health care can be built. Additionally, instructing new officer recruits that job stress is commonly associated with the law enforcement career field and that it can and should be managed will likely reduce burnout, turnover, suicide, and the stigma related to seeking assistance.

### **Barriers and Issues**

Several barriers exist in conducting this type of research, which may limit the potential usefulness of the study's results. First, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement chooses their subject matter experts from the law enforcement community across the State to develop curriculum for the Basic Recruit Academy. Conducting research that could result in the questioning of the accepted dogma has the potential to meet with resistance from the selected subject matter experts. While the standard within law enforcement has commonly been established by the anecdotal evidence and tradition, the introduction of research and evidence-based policy is necessary for the profession to move forward (Lum, Koper, & Telep, 2011).

Completing this research will require the support of the Training Center Directors who manage the 40 Florida Department of Law Enforcement training centers across the state. It may also be necessary to obtain the approval of the Criminal Justice Standards and Training Commission whose members are made up of various representatives of the Florida criminal justice system. A presentation to these two groups establishing the need to address this topic may be needed to earn their approval. The presentation, if needed,

will focus on the current state of training on the subject of in the line of duty stress and officer suicide as well as the research related to mental health in the millennial generation.

Second, law enforcement is an exclusive field of work that is not often accessible by those outside the discipline. Any research into the law enforcement world requires the researcher to gain the confidence of participants. Law enforcement officer recruits are trained throughout the academy to rely on their judgment and be wary of anyone who has not been vetted. Recruits are also heavily influenced by the socialization that occurs during law enforcement training (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010). These recruits may find a survey and interview addressing their knowledge and opinions of mental health needs in a law enforcement career intrusive in nature or a threat to their future career. Members of the sample may feel as if they should answer in a manner in which they believe a law enforcement officer would respond as opposed to providing candid answers.

My prior law enforcement field experience and current assignment as a law enforcement officer and academy instructor will allow me to establish credibility in the field that may not be provided solely by academic credentialing. This credibility will be the key to gaining data that is commonly concealed from the public. I introduced myself to each participant and provided a background summary of my law enforcement career exploits. Field experiences and shared terminology should assist in establishing a trusting relationship.

### **Definitions of Terms**

Basic Recruit Academy: the State of Florida standardized curriculum required to be taught to all new law enforcement recruits before becoming a certified law enforcement officer

First Responders: members of Fire Departments, Emergency Medical Services, Public Safety Telecommunication, and Law Enforcement Agencies whose primary job is to assist the public with emergency responses.

Millennial Generation: the cohort born between approximately 1982 and 2002

### **Summary**

An increased understanding of mental health and suicide within the law enforcement community is needed if we hope to make strides in improving the long-term psychological survival of those who enter law enforcement. The millennial generation law enforcement officer has both a different understanding and perception on the topic and therefore distinct needs than not observed in previous generations. Collecting and analyzing data directly from millennial generation law enforcement recruits will offer a beginning point for researchers and agencies to develop programs and policies to assist officers in the field.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

The cumulative effects of a 20 plus year career in the law enforcement world often result in traumatic stress injuries that are not recognized or ignored by officers and agencies. Unlike the military, where cumulative stress is present, but the traumatic stressors of combat occur in staggered increments usually associated with deployments; law enforcement is dealing with this cumulative stress for the entirety of a career and the uncertainty of a traumatic incident on a daily basis. These stressors may result in the development of varying mental health conditions including post-traumatic stress or more significantly suicide.

Suicide continues to be the single leading cause of death for law enforcement officers each year. While it is challenging to determine actual statistics, due to varying reporting requirements throughout the country, it is estimated that the suicide rate for law enforcement officer in the United States lies somewhere between 16 and 18 per 100,000 officers (O'Hara et al., 2012). In 2012, 133 law enforcement officers died in the line of duty as a result of accidental circumstances, felonious assaults, and motor vehicle crashes, while during the same period 126 took their lives (O'Hara et al., 2012).

The millennial generation, who has reported more mental health issues than any previous generation (Watkins, Hunt, & Eisenberg, 2012; Twenge et al., 2010) is now entering law enforcement, and the long-term consequences are of particular concern. This generation is entering a high-stress career field known to have a significant amount of both cumulative and traumatic sources of stress. Coupled with the already increased rate of existing or reported mental health conditions and an artificially instilled separation of

support networks as a result of law enforcement training the millennial generation is likely to suffer additional mental health strains without a change in police culture.

Discussing mental health has long been considered taboo in the law enforcement world. A culture steeped in tradition, control, compartmentalization, and machismo has created an environment that attempts to suppress natural stress responses and declines intervention, electing instead to ignore any issues. Changing this culture will require a shift in the ideology of line officers and a significant commitment by supervisors.

### **The Millennial Generation**

Cultural experience influences whom an individual becomes, what their view of the world is, and how that view coincides or contrasts with reality (Ng & McGinnis-Johnson, 2015). Studies suggest that the generation in which you were born may have more influence on personality traits than other significant sources of influence including the family in which you are raised (Twenge et al., 2010). The millennial generation, born in the United States between 1982 and 2002, (Howe & Strauss, 2009) was raised in a world that taught them to be self-focused and that they would be rewarded for effort shown. The consistent encouragement that each millennial is special and that participation awards are given for even the worst performers have created an ideology of self-importance that permeates the belief system of many members of this birth cohort.

The millennial generation is dissimilar from previous generations in which they have been independent and been provided the opportunity to make choices from the earliest ages. No matter how insignificant the decision, millennials commonly were allowed to choose their dress, the food they ate, and which social norms they elected to adopt. Rather than being taught to conform to strict social norms they were encouraged to

create the person they wanted to be both internally and externally despite public sentiment (Twenge, 2006).

After allowing this level of independence, the millennial generation then learned that they could make errors without significant consequence. Some schools stopped publishing the honor roll, declined to correct errors in spelling, and stopped using letter grades to judge performance to increase self-esteem in their students (Twenge, 2006). The millennial generation was the first to be taught that everyone should have high self-esteem despite his or her actions or accomplishments. Awards and recognition were associated with their effort and not by achieving a specified standard (Hill, 2002).

Many members of the millennial generation developed a disconnect between the understanding that an individual should reach a goal before being able to obtain a reward. As a result, the millennial generation has reported higher levels of self-esteem and self-satisfaction while also reporting lower levels of self-competence than previous generations (Twenge & Campbell, 2008). The reported lack of competence continued to affect the millennials as they entered college with higher numbers reporting they felt overwhelmed and that their emotional health was below average (Twenge, 2015). Their belief that everyone is special and can accomplish anything they desire is challenged by the increased pressures of college education and for many their first actions as independent adults.

Unlike the self-esteem that has been pushed onto the millennial generation as the panacea for all their desires, self-control is a more significant predictor of success in life (Twenge, 2006). Individuals who are taught or learn to persevere despite challenging obstacles improve in all areas of their lives. Unfortunately, the millennial generation, in

general, has known primarily instant gratification and unconditional validation from parents, teachers, and coaches (Twenge & Campbell, 2008) which has created an unrealistic expectation of the challenges of adulthood.

The millennial generation is facing a harsh reality as they enter adulthood and their optimism may be further challenged as they finish school and enter the workforce. This problem is significant for those millennials who have chosen law enforcement as their profession. Problem-solving and patience have been identified as necessary skills for a successful law enforcement career. Additionally these skills are also essential elements of sound mental health, but in general, the millennial generation is lacking in these areas (Bland, Melton, Welle, & Bigham, 2012).

The significant responsibilities of a law enforcement officer, consistent interaction with the criminal element, and challenges that face society can add significant stress to anyone. The ideas that everyone is special and can do anything they desire is contrasted with the realities that each law enforcement officer will face working on the streets. The confrontation of interpersonal violence and human aggression can challenge the beliefs of the millennial generation recruits by adding additional stressors to new law enforcement officers unfamiliar with this behavior as a result of their upbringing.

Despite growing up in a more stable society, with better education, and gaining an ever-increasing list of modern conveniences, the millennial generation is contending with mental health issues. While the generation has benefited from high self-esteem and limited exposure to significant socioeconomic challenges it has reported more mental health issues than any previous generation in history. Only 1-2% of Americans born before 1915, who lived through the Great Depression and two World Wars, reported

experiencing any major depressive disorder requiring either medication or therapy. It is now estimated that between 10-15% of Americans will be diagnosed with a major depressive disorder throughout their lifetime (Twenge, 2006).

The generations existing before the millennials assumed that depression and suicide were issues for middle-aged individuals struggling to reconcile their life choices, but today depression and suicide are increasingly more common in young adults. The number of people being treated for depression tripled between 1987 and 1997 (Olfson, Marcus, Druss, & Elinson, 2002) and 10% of the population was taking a prescription antidepressant by 2002 (Mojtabai & Olfson, 2008). The lifetime prevalence of developing major depressive disorder is now estimated to be as high as 16% for adults living in the United States (Gartlehner et al., 2016). When accounting for the age at death from 2010-2015, suicide ranks as the fourth leading cause of life lost in the US (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017a). Suicide is the second leading cause of death for individuals between 15-34 years of age (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017b).

Increased use of technology has made it easier to stay connected with friends and family, but they have also decreased in-person communication. Reliance on social media interactions as a substitute for personal connections has proven to create less supportive relationships (Twenge et al., 2010) which are needed during times of stress. Previous generations who struggled for existence during major wars and economic hardship always maintained a sense of community and belonging as they relied on their friends and family for survival. The current lack of close personal relationships has resulted in an increase in reported levels of loneliness, which has increased stress and depression

(Twenge et al., 2010). The idea, which has been taught to the millennial generation, that independence is beneficial to the human experience, may be detrimental to their mental health.

### **First Responders and Mental Health**

First responders, made up of firefighters, emergency medical personnel, public safety telecommunicators, and law enforcement officers are all careers fields associated with high levels of danger, which may cause both physical and psychological injury (Rutkow, Gable, & Links, 2011). While their roles vary according to primary mission and skill set, each first responder is directly involved in critical incident response and management. Among first responders, a large number of variables are correlated with the development of post-traumatic stress disorder. Prior exposure to trauma, symptoms of depression, substance or alcohol abuse, and perceived exposure to danger during and after a critical incident are all positively correlated with the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (Kleim, & Westphal, 2011).

Perceived and received social support has been found to be a significant mitigating factor in the prevention of mental health issues among first responders. A meta-analysis of 37 empirical studies was conducted by Prati and Pietrantonio (2010b) examining the correlation between social support and mental health among first responders. The results showed a significant correlation with increased perception and reception of social support resulting in a declination of reported mental health concerns; however, the nature in which this increased resilience is created is unclear. Prati and Pietrantonio (2010b) suggest that interventions that increase social support systems in first responders are likely to improve mental health.

Most trauma faced by first responders is not shared in a clinical or social setting, and therefore it is left up to the individual to manage. In order to change this and increase the benefits of social support, first responders must have their mindset changed from the critical incident functioning to post-incident functioning (Flannery, 2015). During a critical incident, first responders often report feeling personally detached from the scene, making a self-directed decision, and being hypervigilant. However, for first responders to obtain the most benefit from social support or other treatment options, this mindset must be reset into a post-incident function (Flannery, 2015). Social support plays a significant role in how first responders can assimilate trauma and increase resilience (Garner, Baker, & Hagelgans, 2016) if they are willing to accept this type of assistance.

A meta-analysis of 28 studies covering 45 years of research found that worldwide an estimated 10% of all first responders qualified for a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (Berger et al., 2012). The researchers reported that this estimate is almost certainly low due to the stigma associated with reporting mental health issues. However, even with a low estimate being used, it is significantly higher than the 1.3-3.5% of reported post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms found in the general population (Berger et al., 2012).

The prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder may vary significantly among first responder occupations even when deployed to the same emergency call. Major disasters and sudden catastrophe can cause psychological distress in 25% or more of the affected population including the first responders sent to the scene (Everly Jr, McCabe, Semon, Thompson, & Links, 2014). However, this does not always result in a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder. Berger et al., (2012) found that exposure to trauma

associated with a major disaster was not any more significantly correlated with post-traumatic stress disorder than traumatic exposures occurring during day-to-day operations. The nature of the work environment often limits the first responder's ability to process one traumatic incident before being sent to another emergency call, which compounds the stress (Flannery, 2015).

### **Law Enforcement Culture**

The law enforcement culture begins with the type of people who elect to join this field of work. Research suggests that in general, law enforcement trainees are likely to be mentally more stable upon entry into the law enforcement academy than the general population (Ghazinour, Lauritz, Du Preez, Cassimjee, & Richter, 2010). Additionally, officers are subjected to a battery of exams, including psychological evaluations before employment, which should establish a mental health record reflecting no significant issues at the beginning of their career.

A study conducted of police recruits in Sweden found that when matched for demographics such as age, race, gender, and education; these trainees were more relaxed, and had more optimistic attitudes. Additionally, they were more confident and more outgoing than the matched members of the general population (Ghazinour et al., 2010). With this in mind, the mental health changes that occur in the law enforcement officer through training and fieldwork must be examined.

Law enforcement has a long history in which the acceptable norms within the culture have been emphasized through indoctrination beginning in the academy and being reinforced through the entire career (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010). The socialization is a dominant force, especially for a recruit seeking acceptance in a field that is not open

to non-members. The culture is passed from senior officer to rookie with each new police academy instructor's lecture, war stories, and practical exercises. Anyone challenging the existing dogma of academy curriculum and accepted norms creates tension and is likely to be removed from the program or ostracized by their peers as a matter of survival (Karp & Stenmark, 2011). Trainees are taught that they must rely on each other for everything and that the team always comes before the individual.

Five basic law enforcement recruit classes which included between twenty and thirty students were observed as part of a research study conducted by Chappell and Lanza-Kaduce (2010). The researchers noted the paramilitary style structure, war stories, and uniformity maintained through discipline ensured all recruits formed into a team that believed in solidarity and loyalty. This same socialization helps create an "us vs. them" ideology amongst the students who begin to see the public as a separate entity. The research also suggested this same "us versus them" concept instills the belief that law enforcement officers should only discuss their issues with each other, as people outside law enforcement would not understand (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010).

The idea of "us versus them" often separates law enforcement officers from the members of society who could help them such as support networks at home and professional counselors who may be seen as untrustworthy. Additionally, since maintaining control is held in such high regard within the career field, any acknowledgment of a loss of control or mental health issue to a peer is considered a sign of weakness, and therefore a stigma is associated with seeking help (White, Shrader, & Chamberlain, 2016). Stigma is a significant obstacle to those needing assistance managing mental health problems.

As law enforcement officers are increasingly being called upon to respond to and manage mental health crisis in society, there is an increased demand for better training and understanding for officers who must deal with the public. In a research study conducted by Hansson and Markström (2014), two groups of law enforcement academy students were measured to establish knowledge level and perceptions of mental health issues within the community. These instruments were completed in the first semester of training for one group the third semester of training for the other group. Results of the study show that law enforcement academy students who have completed training curriculum on the topic of mental health concepts and responses reduced their reported stigma level and increased their inclination to work with those dealing with a mental health crisis for resolution. These results were positive for officer/citizen encounters showing that through training, officers can increase knowledge and understanding of a mental health crisis. The anti-stigma interventions used in this academy curriculum were developed to reduce the divide between officer and citizens facing a mental health crisis, but its effectiveness suggests that a possibility exists to reduce the mental health stigma that is found within members of the career field.

The United States military service has come to understand that combat operations often serve as initiates of multiple mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder. The military has also learned that early intervention and management can reduce the long-term effects of such mental trauma. However, like law enforcement, the need for mental health services is often curtailed by the ignominy that is found throughout the military service.

Recognizing that the stigma associated with mental health is a barrier to those who need to seek help, the United States Air Force developed a training program aimed at improving mental health with Security Forces personnel. Security Forces members serve as law enforcement officers while on military bases and as ground combat units when forward deployed in Iraq (Bryan & Morrow, 2011). The mental health program developed by the Air Force sought to change the mindset of the individual service member and ultimately the organization as a whole about mental health. The participants completed a survey to determine the usefulness of the program and the vast majority reported it to be effective.

While it was also found that Security Forces members were highly resilient and healthy, the majority still reported combat service ranked in the top three life-changing events. The reported effectiveness of this training program on Security Forces personnel suggests that training on individual skill sets to manage stress could be beneficial to civilian law enforcement officers.

### **Stress**

Stress is a significant factor commonly found in a law enforcement career. While the source of the stress varies, managing it is typically left up to the individual officer, and this may become particularly problematic for millennial generation officers unprepared for both cumulative and traumatic stressors. Millennial age college students have reported varying levels of stress and types of coping strategies throughout their educational endeavors.

In a study by Bland, Melton, Welle, and Bigham (2012), a random selection of college students completed modified versions of the Life Event Checklist (LEC), Daily

Hassle Questionnaire (DHQ) and Stress Tolerance Questionnaire (STQ). Data obtained from this instrument allowed the researchers to divide students into high (HST) and low-stress tolerance (LST) groups based on reactions to stress. Ten coping strategies were identified as being correlated with HST while nine were correlated with LST. Of the 29 factors assessed in the study, social support was the only significant protective factor associated with HST (Bland et al., 2012). Family, friends, and other social networks where these students discussed issues or concerns provided social support. These networks are often lacking in the lives of millennial generation members, as electronic connections have very often been substituted for real-world interaction. Additionally, these are same networks that law enforcement officers are commonly taught would not understand their problems and therefore should not be relied on for support or understanding following a critical incident (Chappell, & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010).

Colleges and universities have seen an increasing demand for mental health services on campuses by millennial generation students as they entered their first year of schooling. Qualitative and quantitative data show that mental health issues in millennial-age students are occurring more consistently and with an increased severity than that of previous generations (Watkins, Hunt, & Eisenberg, 2012). Watkins et al. (2012) also found that while millennial age students have grown up benefiting from technology, the reliance on this same technology and the instant gratification it can provide has had a detrimental effect on their ability to manage the demands of college. As this same generation enter law enforcement, similar issues identified by Watkins et al. (2012) are likely to present themselves and possibly have influence that is more significant as the level of stress increases.

Perceptions of stress affect both reported job satisfaction and quality of life measurements within law enforcement officers (Alexopoulos, Palatsidi, Tigani, & Darviri, 2014). Cumulative stressors such as organizational stress, associated with a lack of communication, undefined goals, lack of autonomy and perceived low support from the chain of command affect between 19 and 30% of the general working population. These same issues are present in many law enforcement agencies. The consistent strain can lead to burnout, and low productivity, and an inability to manage traumatic stress (Finney, Stergiopoulos, Hensel, Bonato, & Dewa, 2013).

A study conducted by Violanti et al. (2016a) which looked at the stress associated with law enforcement organizations found the work environment, which had high demands and low control was significantly correlated with emotional exhaustion. The emotional exhaustion and the feeling of hopelessness are highly correlated with suicide. According to Violanti et al. (2016a), the feeling of hopelessness has been reportedly increasing among current law enforcement officers. Violanti et al. (2016a) state that the administrative practices of the law enforcement agency and the lack of support from their organization are the variables most closely correlated with the feeling of hopelessness.

Recent increases in the scrutiny of police/citizen interactions have also raised the stress level of officers in the field. Greater demand by society and reduced autonomy in law enforcement are both predictors of emotional exhaustion (Padyab, Backteman-Erlanson, & Brulin, 2013). Millennial generation officers may be particularly vulnerable to the stress associated with this scrutiny as it may contradict their personal belief that their level of work is sufficient for praise despite its merit. In some cases, law

enforcement officers may act lawfully and still be subject to intense review and harsh judgment in the courts of public opinion, which increases stress.

A 27-month longitudinal study of law enforcement officers was initiated looking at both cumulative and acute stressors. As expected, data analysis showed that officers who faced more frequent and more severe threats were also more likely to report mental health problems. This result was present even when no previous mental health issues were reported (van der Velden, Kleber, Grievink, & Yzermans, 2010). However, law enforcement officers with an increased level of emotional stability are likely to have reduced degree of stress when faced with a critical incident (Garbarino, Chiorri, & Magnavita, 2014). Finding a way to increase emotional stability in millennial generation law enforcement officers would be beneficial for both officer and agency.

One of the most significant events that can occur in a law enforcement officer's career is the killing or significantly injuring another person in the line of duty. A three-year longitudinal study was conducted on officers with the first of five measurements being taken in the police academy. Ten percent of the officers reported having to kill or injure an individual while on duty during the study period. Multiple regression analysis was used to determine if killing or injuring another person was associated with post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, depression, social adjustment, or alcohol consumption. The analysis shows that the infliction of harm or death on another person was related to post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms and a marginally linked to depression (Komarovskaya et al., 2011). Due to the nature of law enforcement officer's work, the potential to kill or harm another individual in the line of duty will continue to

be a factor that affects mental health and therefore must be considered when training new police recruits and managing a significant use of force incident.

Police officers are on a regular basis exposed to chronic and acute stressors not experienced by members of the general population (Gutshall et al., 2017). In a study which included a sample of both police administrators and line level officers both groups reported that over 70% of their duty time is focused on routine calls for service. Additionally, they agreed that witnessing a traumatic event, being involved in a physical altercation, and the pursuit of a suspect are the most stressful duties despite these situations accounting for less than 5% of an officer's time (Korre, Farioli, Varvarigou, Sato, & Kales, 2014). While the time period for the high-level stressors is limited, there is often a significant impact on law enforcement officer's lives if not appropriately managed.

Acute and chronic stress can alter perception and affect problem-solving capabilities leading to the incorrect interpretation of events. Research suggests that law enforcement officers who live with this kind of stress are more likely to develop physiological and psychological issues, which affect both work and personal lives. Inaccurate perception of the facts could result in an inappropriate use of force and a failure to recall facts following a stressful event (Gutshall et al., 2017).

Most law enforcement officers have not been adequately trained to manage the traumatic and chronic stressors associated with a law enforcement career. Additional training is needed to manage stress-related symptoms, which occur both during and after an event. Reducing post-traumatic stress disorder, burnout, health issues, and increasing

performance, memory recall, and decision-making abilities under stress are all possible (Gutshall et al., 2017).

### **Suicide**

First responders, including law enforcement officers, are presented with significant stressors through their line of work that may leave them vulnerable to post-traumatic stress symptoms and suicide. Research has identified five risk factors for law enforcement suicide including organizational stress, critical incident trauma, shift work, relationship problems, and alcohol abuse (Chae and Boyle, 2013). Even the early research of Nelson and Smith (1970) suggested that law enforcement officers may be at particular risk for completing suicide due to their regular encounters with life and death situations in which both their life or the life of another is in imminent peril.

The regular threat to an officers life due to interpersonal violence is dissimilar from first responders in fire or EMS who spend the majority of their time responding to calls for service where only the life of another individual is at risk. However, research has shown that when firefighters responded to a suicide death scene rather than a fire or medical type call, they were significantly more likely to report suicidal ideation and attempts during their lifetime (Stanley, Hom, Hagan, & Joiner, 2015). Calls for completed suicides are everyday occurrences for law enforcement officers across the country.

A systematic literature review was conducted by Stanley, Hom, & Joiner (2016), looking at suicide in first responders. Sixty-three quantitative studies were reviewed that met the requirements set forth by the researchers. These studies looked at suicide, suicidal ideation, and risk versus protective factors found in the first responder

community. A meta-analysis of the empirical data provided several risk correlates associated with the first responder career field.

First, the inherent risk associated with the line of work may reduce the fear of one's own death. Second, shift work, which is commonly associated with law enforcement work, often affects sleep patterns and strains social support networks, both of which can result in increased stress. Third, a stigma associated with seeking mental health services is present within the work environment (White, Shrader, & Chamberlain, 2016). An elevated risk for suicide was found among first responders when compared to similar populations in some studies, and the risk for suicide was reportedly equal to similar populations in other studies. Despite the inconsistent findings in the research, the most significant result is that first responder personnel are considered "healthy workers" and as a result should have a reduced suicide rate when compared to a similar population.

A national research study conducted by Violanti (2010) looked at police suicides compared to members of the military and firefighters in an attempt to provide an equivalent comparison population. While the military was found to have the highest suicide rate in this study, police suicide levels were found to be four times greater than that of firefighters. The cause of death for law enforcement officers was reported as a suicide in 35 % of the data. Age proved to be a significant risk factor in law enforcement suicide with younger officers being more likely to die by suicidal means. 18.34% of suicides for male police officers and 33.9% for female police officers occurred in the 21-30 years of age group (Violanti, 2010). This age group is currently made up of the millennial generation.

Amongst the general population, generations that are more recent have shown increasing suicide rates among young adults. While statistically a rare event, there has also been an increasing suicide rate within the United States military. The military, which has a large population of young males, who are known to have a higher rate of suicide than the general population, is currently trying to address mental health concerns among their members.

A study conducted by Griffith and Bryan (2016) found that the increased suicide rates among the military are correlated with birth cohorts. Twenge et al. (2010) suggest that there is a decrease in social integration and increased vulnerability among the more recent generations, which are likely related to mental health issues. Combat stresses associated with military duty may compound the existing vulnerability resulting in an increasing suicide rate among soldiers.

Current military training models seek to enhance mental health resilience by focusing on cognitive behavioral therapy. However, results from this study suggest training should concentrate on increasing social conformity to group norms that could heighten resiliency. The latest generation of law enforcement officers are likely to present similar social disconnection resulting in increased suicide risks and could benefit from training that seeks to reverse this issue.

### **Mitigation**

The high stress and traumatic events that an officer faces throughout a career have strained many police officers who may not be trained on what to expect from their body or mind following a critical incident. The method for obtaining treatment of a psychological injury, including managing its short and long-term effects is not well

advertised within the law enforcement community (Faust & Ven, 2014). Stanley et al. (2016) report that even if officers are aware of the methods in which to get help, they most often fail to utilize mental health services due to the associated stigma. Connecting law enforcement officers in need of services is essential to reduce suicide rates, but the stigma remains a significant hindrance to this endeavor.

Practical training can mitigate some of the effects of stress and mental trauma for law enforcement officers. An integrated mental health program established for law enforcement should address a variety of stress sources from the everyday stressors to traumatic incidents to reduce and manage mental health problems (van der Velden, Kleber, Grievink, & Yzermans, 2010). This training should begin at the academy level and be reiterated throughout their years of service.

Early in their career, the average police trainee is mentally healthier than a comparable member of the general population. Police trainees reported significantly fewer psychopathological symptoms and psychological problems in almost all areas in which they were tested (Ghazinour, Lauritz, Du Preez, Cassimjee, & Richter, 2010). However, for the training to be beneficial, it must be relevant to the real world.

Research has shown that academy curriculum often fails to align with field training programs, which were created to allow new officers to practice academy training in a real-world environment under the direct supervision of a senior officer. Only 10% of what is learned in the training academy is applied to the job, and the theory taught in the academy does not readily translate to the field (Caro, 2011). The lack of direct correlation between basic recruit training and the real world should initiate a systematic review of the current training curriculum including the mental health and stress management

components. However, the existing culture that emphasizes in-group solidarity, us vs. them ideology, and performance under stress (Chappell, & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010) may not readily accept the introduction of new material that seeks to modify the existing dogma.

When an opportunity to teach about stress reduction is afforded during or after the basic recruit training, research has shown beneficial outcomes at least in the area of perceived stress (Anshel, Umscheid, & Brinthaup, 2013). A large-scale study, looking at the effects of a comprehensive police suicide prevention program which included training supervisors, employees, and established a Police Resource Board, found improvements in intervention strategies and increased overall knowledge of the issue. This resulted in a statistically pronounced 78.9% reduction in all manner of the stress-related phenomenon, including suicide (Mishara & Martin, 2012).

One of the most significant mitigators of post-traumatic stress is resilience. Naz & Gavin (2013) found through multiple regression analysis a strong association exists between officer resilience and mental health. A significant inverse relationship was observed between mental health and resiliency, and a significant positive correlation was found between coping approaches and resilience. Determining what factors, increase officer resilience is likely to improve agency operations and ensure the well-being of officers. Naz and Gavin (2013) go on to suggest that an emphasis should be placed on training and increasing awareness as to the issues of trauma and mental health. The same study suggests that length of service correlated with resilience levels with longer lengths of service being assigned to the non-resilient groups. This finding identifies the need to reinforce resilience factors while reducing risk factors throughout the entirety of the career.

One factor studied in relation to resilience is coping strategies. Rational coping is a significant predictor of resilience and can be reinforced through training, but this skill can have detrimental effects on the officer's emotional well-being as it limits the officer's ability to manage their emotional reactions to a critical incident (Balmer, Pooley, & Cohen, 2014). The millennial generation has been shown to rely on avoidance coping strategies that focus on external sources of relief and only support low levels of stress tolerance (Bland, Melton, Welle, & Bigham, 2012). Avoidance coping was found to be negatively correlated with resilience in a sample population of law enforcement officers (LeBlanc, Regehr, Jelley, & Barath, 2008). There is a significant threat posed by the stress levels associated with law enforcement and the potential short and long-term effects on the mental health of the millennial generation.

Determination of resilience in a study of Italian police officers helped identify some of these risks and protective features found in officers. Socially supportive structures such as family, friend, and peer support play a significant role in resilience. The individual officers' self-esteem levels were also determined to affect the ability to recover from a traumatic event (Prati & Pietrantonio, 2010a).

However, protective factors can become quickly overcome when a law enforcement officer is managing multiple risk factors (Stanley et al., 2015). One of the more interesting findings in the study, which is also consistent with Naz and Gavin's (2013) work was the length of service affected the level of resilience. Officers who had the most extended length of service at the time of the traumatic incident did not fare as well mentally as those with shorter lengths of service. This discovery is likely a result of the cumulative effect of stress on a career filled with multiple exposures to critical

incidents and the associated trauma that had not been resolved (Prati & Pietrantonio, 2010a). Each of these findings suggests the need for training and mental health checkups throughout the career can be vital in reducing post-traumatic stress and officer suicide.

Psychological hardiness may cause law enforcement officers to ignore early signs of stress, which is likely to have an adverse impact on health and lead to burnout. Officers who investigated violent crimes reported higher levels of hardiness than those who worked on non-violent offenses. This suggests that officers responding to the calls that are likely to be inherently more traumatic are the same officers who report they are immune to the effects of psychological stress and therefore less likely to seek assistance from outside support services. Another factor that slows an officer from seeking help is a commitment to the mission. Officers focused on accomplishing the goal at all costs may override their ability to recognize that work stress has surpassed their coping capability (Fyhn, Fjell, & Johnsen, 2015).

### **Family Members and Peers**

Law enforcement officers, subject to both primary and secondary trauma through their work and as such commonly learn self-management techniques as well as establish informal support networks to assist in resilience and mental health management. Despite best efforts to limit exposure, law enforcement families and peers can become the first line of support for officers in need. Additionally peer and family members are often in the best position to observe day-to-day changes within an officer allowing them to serve as an early warning system for stress and suicide. The social support provided by these networks has been shown through a meta-analysis of to be a resilience factor for law enforcement officers following a traumatic event (Prati & Pietrantonio, 2010b)

Mental health professionals, have questioned the effectiveness of peer support programs however within law enforcement culture (Everly & Mitchell, 2000), however informal peer support is the most common source of social support for officers. Peers are recognized as automatically understanding a situation better than those outside the field because of their similar experience. This credibility is automatically assigned to a peer within the same field and can not be obtained through academic credentialing. However, peer effectiveness is tied to the type of training they have received and understanding their limitations (Everly, 2006).

Family support networks commonly consisting of spouse of significant other as well as parents are also commonly in close contact with officers on a regular basis. These family members are affected by the police subculture as it become part of their lives as their officer brings many aspects of it home. However, families are often not prepared for the stressors associated with law enforcement work and even less prepared for dealing with traumatic stress symptomatology.

Law enforcement family members often report work/family conflict such as having to deal with scheduling conflicts and managing family problems alone, as a significant source of stress (Karaffa et al., 2015). The everyday cumulative and traumatic stressors of a law enforcement career have the potential to create officers devoid of emotion if identified and properly managed. Additionally law enforcement officers may not recognize changes in their behavior that is more easily observable from the outside. Families could benefit from training the allows them to gain a better understanding of law enforcement work, culture, and stress, (Perez, Jones, Englert, & Sachau, 2010) and in turn could help identify when officers are in need of mental health services.

**Summary**

The literature review looks at law enforcement suicide and stress along with internal and external mitigating factors that can be used to limit the strain associated with a career in this field. Suicide and post-traumatic stress disorder both have similar aggravating and mitigating factors that can be identified and exploited by organizations attempting to increase resiliency in their officers. High pressure, violence, and resistance to seeking help from sources outside the law enforcement guild are ever-present forces throughout a career that influences mental health.

Each of these factors by themselves increases the chances of police suicide and post-traumatic stress responses. Combining these factors with a critical incident or the cumulative stress of multiple incidents and an officer may become overwhelmed. Even if an officer does not display the immediate onset of a post-traumatic stress disorder or other psychological damage from a critical incident, they may be masking their emotions due to cultural stigma.

The millennial generation may be especially sensitive to the stressors associated with the law enforcement work environment. The increased independence and use of technology to communicate has limited some members of the cohort their ability to establish significant support networks capable of sustaining them when they feel overwhelmed by stress. Additionally, the constant reinforcement that they should feel special and the belief that their best is good enough may be damaged by the first interaction with violence and human aggression. The realization that even the best effort does not always equate to positive outcomes within law enforcement is likely to increase stress levels in younger officers. The millennial generation has increasing reports of

mental health issues found in the birth cohort, which will affect their law enforcement careers if not adequately managed.

Several research publications discuss the benefit of training officers to establish a foundation in stress management techniques as well as increasing resilience through focused training. The studies on stress and suicide focused on seasoned officers with significant experience, as they were the ones most likely to be faced with traumatic situations through work while recruits operating in a controlled training environment are relatively unscathed. However, the recruit training environment has a significant opportunity to affect the long-term mental health of law enforcement officers by creating a culture of new norms, which include mental health dialogue, training, and treatment. Long-term results will still require continued training throughout a career, but within two or three generations of law enforcement officers, the stigma currently embedded in the culture could be removed. With a new culture in place as the result of training, an officer could be better prepared at the start of their career for the corrosive environment in which they will soon work.

### **Research Questions**

RQ 1: What are the perceptions of millennial-aged Florida Law Enforcement Basic Recruit Academy students of the need for mental health training in the reduction of law enforcement officer stress and suicide?

RQ 2: What are the perceptions of millennial-aged Florida Law Enforcement Basic Recruit Academy students of the need for mental health training in the reduction of the cultural stigma associated with mental health treatment within the law enforcement career?

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

#### **Research Method**

A qualitative methods study was conducted following the phenomenological approach with an existential design through the course of this research. Phenomenology seeks to understand how the individual sees reality in the context of their lives. The existential design of phenomenological research seeks to gather concrete descriptions of the experience and then comprehend the phenomena as a whole in context with the real world (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017; von Eckartsberg, 1997). Existential phenomenology suggests that the human experience is not fixed but changes through the individual perspective of possibility and limitation within the world (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997).

The millennial generation has a lived experience that has varied from previous generations with the rapid technological changes, an increased number of members attending of postsecondary education, and globalization (Ng & McGinnis-Johnson, 2015). Their perception of phenomena is influenced by their experience and therefore to obtain an understanding of stress and suicide in the law enforcement this research collected data in context and seeks to identify the core of their beliefs. Additionally, phenomenology recognizes that the truth of any phenomena is an abstract concept affected by the individual perception of those who live through it (Starks & Brown-Trinidad, 2007). Stanley et al., (2015) suggest that qualitative research is needed to further the understanding of stress, suicidal ideation, and suicide within the first responder field.

Collingridge and Gantt (2008) suggest that researchers must understand the basic foundations of phenomena in order to affect the most positive change. The existential design of the research considers phenomena as being influenced by both the experience of the person and the dynamics of the world. These two things are interdependent, and understanding phenomena, therefore, require that we do not try to compartmentalize specific pieces, but that we consider the way individuals are influenced by their environment and how the environment is in turn influenced by the individuals who are in it (Polkinghorne, 1989).

### **Participants**

This research is focused on the millennial generation participants who were born between 1982 and 2002. This generation has been found to report more mental health issues than any previous generation in history (Watkins, Hunt, & Eisenbeg, 2012). In addition, participants must be enrolled in the Florida Basic Recruit Law Enforcement Training Academy. These individuals must not have completed more than the first half of the required coursework at the Academy. The intense nature of many police academies increases mental and physical stress on trainees. The result is commonly the formation of a bond among the recruits and a sense of solidarity (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010). This bond is essential for successful completion of the academy, and its existence is even more critical in the field when law enforcement officers depend on each other for their physical survival. However, the same bond that is originated during the indoctrination process of the academy can influence thought process and individual opinion creating a groupthink like response. Selection of participants early in their training was chosen in an

effort to limit the potential influence of academy training and provide a more diverse set of responses.

### **Participant Selection**

Participants were purposely selected to meet study requirements. Informed consent and waivers were obtained from each participant. A research protocol was established and used throughout the interviews. The research protocol ensured consistent questioning and probing was used with each of the sample participants. Additionally, this protocol ensured that I did not forget to obtain needed information. The protocol included pertinent details of the research purpose, reminders of confidentiality, demographic collection form, and interview questions.

The identification of the sample population was completed through direct contact with Directors of Florida Department of Law Enforcement approved training centers. Twenty-five participants were purposely selected to fit the needs of the study (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). All participants were volunteers.

The sample population for this study was selected to maintain racial and gender ratios found among the general population of law enforcement officers in the State of Florida. The Florida Department of Law Enforcement (2017) reports that the male to female ratio within the State of Florida for full-time law enforcement officers is 77.2% male and 22.8% female. Maintaining this ratio for this study required 19 males and 6 female participants to be selected for the sample. The Florida Department of Law Enforcement (2017) also reports that the racial makeup of full-time law enforcement officers is 62.8% White, 20.4% Black, 14.1% Hispanic, .9% Asian and 1.8% Other.

Maintaining this ratio for this study as close as possible required the sample for this study to include 15 White, 5 Black, 3 Hispanic, and 1 Asian, and 1 Other participant.

### **Instruments**

The research was completed with the collection of demographic data followed by formal interviews of the selected sample. All interviews were separate and held in a private location that was comfortable for the sample participant. Sample participants were informed of the purpose of the study and had any questions or concerns about the research addressed prior to the interview process. Participants were advised that their participation in the study and individual answers provided in reference to the Demographic Information Form (Appendix A) and Interview Questions (Appendix B) are held confidential.

Interview Questions (Appendix B) were used to gather data from individuals willing to share their perspective and on mental health and suicide within the law enforcement career field. This data was transcribed, and consistent themes were identified among the participants (Collingridge & Gantt, 2008). The themes were used to create an understanding of the perspective of the millennial generation law enforcement basic recruit academy recruit in relation to mental health and suicide within the law enforcement field.

### **Procedures**

The research consisted initially of a form which each participant completed containing demographic information (Appendix A). After obtaining demographic information, an interview was conducted using open-ended questions (Appendix B) allowing the participant to expound on individual perceptions of stress, suicide, coping

skills, and support mechanisms. These interviews sought to obtain in-depth data to further the understanding (Hjelmeland & Knizek, 2010) of perceptions of stress and suicide in law enforcement and identify themes which can be used to further additional research, develop evidence-based policy, and modify existing training curriculum if warranted. The interviews were documented in my notes as well as with an audio recording to ensure a complete transcript of the interview was possible. Interviews were entered into qualitative analysis software to create a report, which was used to identify common themes among the sample population.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was continuous throughout the research project. Raw data was obtained through interpersonal interviews with sample participants. Audio recordings were transcribed and read to obtain a sense of the whole and identification of relevant content. The transcribed narrative was then coded into preliminary categories in an effort to identify common ideas among the sample. Similar codes were clustered together and labeled to allow themes to emerge from the existing data (Collingridge & Gantt, 2008; Groenewald, 2004; Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997). These themes were then used to create a description of the perspective on mental health and suicide held by millennial age law enforcement basis recruit academy students in context with their experiences in the lived world.

NVivo data analysis software was used to assist in processing data gathered from participant interviews. Computer data analysis allowed for increased accuracy, as it limits human error in identifying words or themes which were found within the participant interviews. Follow-up interviews were used to clarify any vague responses and expand on

any other pertinent thoughts the participants may have as they relate to the study.

Additionally, follow up interviews were used to address any contradictory themes that were identified during data analysis (Dale, 1996).

### **Summary**

The qualitative research design used in this study provides for the gathering an understanding of the perceptions of the millennial generation law enforcement recruit as they relate to mental health and suicide within the career field. Research into suicide has been predominantly quantitative in nature providing the explanations of the cause of suicide in the general population. Qualitative research into suicide is lacking, and as a result, the understanding of why suicide is chosen is relatively undocumented (Hjelmeland & Knizek, 2010). Within the law enforcement workforce, suicide is particularly troubling as most officers are subjected to intense psychological, medical, and background screenings before employment to ensure health. Developing an understanding of the perceptions of stress, suicide, and mental health from the millennial generation may identify some mitigation strategies that can reduce symptoms of stress throughout the career. Selecting participants that were consistent with the gender and racial makeup of law enforcement officers offers diverse input, representative of the law enforcement officers who serve within the State of Florida. Interviews offered detailed information in the context of the lives of millennial generation law enforcement officer recruits.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to generate an understanding of stress and suicide as perceived by Florida millennial generation law enforcement recruits. Demographic data was collected followed by an in-person interview which included fifteen open-ended questions (Appendix B). From the interview, five themes were identified as the core beliefs of the cohort. Below is data related to the sample participants as well as the details of responses to interview questions.

### **Demographic Data**

Twenty-five millennial-aged law enforcement academy recruits were selected for this study. The sex and racial makeup were kept consistent with the State of Florida's current statistics for full-time law enforcement officers. The sample was purposively selected to include 19 males and 6 female participants. Additionally, the sample was selected to include 15 White, 5 Black, 3 Hispanic, and 1 Asian, and 1 Other participant which is comparable with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (2017) report of racial representation among full-time law enforcement officers. The age ranged between 19 and 36 years of age with the mean being 26.4 and the median being 24 (Table 1).

### **Interview Questions**

The formal interview consisted of 15 open-ended questions. I have provided the questions and summarized the participant's responses, including quotations when pertinent and appropriate. An analysis of the sample participants responses allowed clear themes to emerge.

#### **1. What experience do you have as a first responder or member of the military?**

Forty percent of the population had prior first responder or military experience (Table 1). While this certainly has an influence on the amount of knowledge one would be expected to have as it relates to mental health and suicide, it is also an indicator of the percentage of law enforcement officers who come into the field with outside experiences similar to being a law enforcement officer. These previous experiences are likely to influence their perceptions and therefore their responses to this study. While previous experience may open their eyes to certain aspects as it relates to this topic it may also limit their willingness to proactively address mental health and suicide issues if these previous experiences were handled poorly. Additionally, prior exposure to direct or vicarious trauma is likely to influence the perceptions of mental health and suicide within the sample participant.

## **2. What level of education have you completed?**

Educational levels varied from General Education Development Certificate (GED) to Bachelor's degrees (Table 1). Law enforcement is often considered a vocational career; however, it is not uncommon for undergraduate degrees to be sought after employment and even required for promotion. The majority of the sample had a high school diploma or equivalent (56%) while only four participants had a bachelor's degree (16%). In comparison with the general population of Florida law enforcement officers, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (2017) reports that across the state 49.4% of law enforcement officers currently have a high school diploma or equivalent and 32.1% of officers hold a Bachelor's degree.

## **3. What does stress mean to you?**

Defining stress provides a basis from which the remainder of the formal interview could be conducted. The individual's ability to understand and cope with stresses in their lives is influenced by their perception of stress and how they approach the management of it in their daily lives. The consensus from the sample population was that stress is a weight that adds pressure or anxiety in one's life. Participant 1 relates that stress can "completely disrupt your life" which can place you outside your comfort zone and make you feel overwhelmed.

#### **4. What particular events in your life have caused you to feel the most stressed?**

Particular life events that resulted in significant stress to the sample participants was varied with only two events repeating themselves in the answers. Five different participants stated that medical issues with a loved one created significant stress in their lives. Three of the sample participants responded that their parents' divorce was a highly stressful event in their lives. Participant 11 related how being kicked out of the house a juvenile was stressful but also provided an opportunity for growth as he was able to reflect and determine how he contributed to being told to leave.

Most relatable to this study was Participant 6 stating that the "inability to control something" had created significant stress in his life. Participant 6 referred to how he had several friends who had died while he was unable to prevent or influence the events. Control is a common theme in police culture and the loss of it can result in death or injury. Additionally, the ability to maintain control during extreme situations is considered a valuable asset to law enforcement officers. Other participants reported having to take a life in combat, being the victim of child abuse, and having their parent attempt suicide as sources of stress in their lives.

### **5. How do you currently manage or cope with stress?**

Exercise was the single greatest method in which the sample participants reported managing or coping with stress with 52% of the sample providing it as a specific coping mechanism they use. Twenty percent of the sample participants suggested that talking with someone about an issue was one of the methods they would use to deal with stress. Smoking, hobbies, faith, writing, and having a positive attitude were also reported by individuals within the sample population.

### **6. What would you identify as sources of stress related to working as a law enforcement officer?**

The sample population exclusively focused on operational stressors associated with law enforcement and did not mention organizational stressors which are commonly reported as significant sources of stress from working law enforcement officers (Finney et al., 2013). Operational stressors included acts of violence, death, and potential threats. Three participants specifically identified child death and investigations involving child victims as a notable source of stress that they expected to deal with while working in law enforcement.

Significantly, Participant 12 identified a source of stress associated with responding to victims of violence but more insightful was the additional detail of existing mental compartmentalization. Participant 12 has prior first responder experience (Table 1). Participant 12 stated, “Like the blood and gunk, let’s say bodily fluids, when it’s not on the job it will cause a gag reflex...but then on the job I never had issue...I accepted that it is kind of like a collateral that comes with the job”. Separation of work and personal life and the use of compartmentalization to manage stressful events is

anecdotally spoken about amongst law enforcement officers as a tool to make it through a career.

Three of the sample participants reported the schedule that law enforcement officers work as a source of stress. Rapid changes, short notice overtime, and interrupted sleep schedules are perceived as challenges by the sample population. Participant 19 suggested that in addition to the unusual hours, there may be a challenge in “mixing your professional and personal life” while working as a law enforcement officer. Finding balance was also mentioned by two other sample participants as a challenge for law enforcement officers.

Six participants suggest that the unknown would be a source of stress. While the environment and threat level are always in flux it can bring both a level of excitement and a level of stress to officers in the field. Participant 17 suggested that due to the dynamic environment in which officer’s work they must, “constantly be on guard” when on duty. The effort it takes to maintain situational awareness throughout an entire shift is perceived as a source of stress. However, officers are trained to be “on guard” even when they are off duty which is likely to increase stress above what is perceived by the sample.

Finally, six members of the sample participant reported the traumatic events such as observing an officer being shot in the line of duty, being on the scene of a death, and being regularly present for things that the “average person rarely or never deals with” (Participant 5) are a source of stress. Two participants referenced carrying the memories of traumatic events with you throughout your career as creating a source of long-term stress. The heavy reliance that society places on officers to solve both criminal and civil

issues creates an “emotionally draining” (Participant 1) environment where officers exist for twenty plus years of service.

**7. What would you identify as sources of support related to working as a law enforcement officer?**

Sources of support were primarily categorized into three areas; family, peers, and professional services. Peers and family members were a decided preference of support by the vast majority of the sample. Professional services were mentioned by a few participants, but even when mentioned, it was perceived as a last resort by the majority.

Seventeen participants in the sample reported that peers would be a source of support for them as they worked through their careers as law enforcement officers. Participant 4 summed up the overall sentiment by stating, “...peer support is a big thing, talking to people who are in your position and understand what you may be going through...” would be a valuable source of support. Participant 15 suggested the “battle buddy” system that is used in the military to pair up individuals so there is always someone there to ensure your back is not left vulnerable to attack. Participant 15 stated of the battle buddy system that they, “deal with a lot of the same stress on a daily basis” and therefore are able to understand and relate to the situation in context. Participant 19 stated of the current law enforcement members he knows, “...they talk to each other more when it comes to support level. I don’t think anybody else is going to know what they are talking about unless you have been in the field.”

Sixteen participants stated they would rely on family members to help support them if they were having trouble dealing with a stressful situation related to their work as law enforcement officers. Participant 18 who suggested that family would be a significant

source of support stated your significant other would be a source of support, “to be able to talk things out obviously within reason of the things that you can talk about”. The end of this statement suggests that some things may be withheld from the family and therefore support may not be available. Anecdotally it is not uncommon for law enforcement officers to restrict their families from knowing exactly what has occurred at work in an effort to shield them from the harsh realities they face.

Five members of the sample suggested that professional services would be a source of support if needed in their law enforcement careers. More interesting was that three who suggested it referenced the use of professional services in a negative way while highlighting peer or family support. Participant 6 who readily suggested both family and peer support ended his response with, “there’s always the mental health route if you really need it” insinuating that this was an option of last resort. Participant 10 when discussing the professional services as a source of support for law enforcement officers stated, “These psychologists get paid to do this, but people who actually know you are probably the one who would be the best ones to do it”. While Participant 11 stated, “They don’t have to go to a psychiatrist...me personally my close-knit family” would be the best source of support. Finally, Participant 5 suggested that professional, “resources out there directed specifically for first responders to help deal with stress” would be a good source of support indicating that resources available for the general public may not be viewed as credible to law enforcement officers without additional credentialing and work in the field.

**8. What is your current level of knowledge about the prevalence of suicide within the law enforcement career field?**

The level on knowledge the sample participants had on the prevalence of suicide within law enforcement was low on most accounts with 22 of the sample participants stating they had little or no knowledge of the prevalence of suicide in the law enforcement career field. Participant 13 summarized his personal knowledge by stating, "...on a scale from 0 to 10 probably a 1." Participant 4 stated he had read some articles on police suicide in the past but like most of the sample knew that this wasn't something that was readily discussed. Participant 8 stated, "I know it is a very stressful job so with stressful jobs you see a lot more suicide rates than like teaching".

### **9. What are your thoughts on suicide?**

The sample participants varied greatly on their perceptions of suicide with a full spectrum of responses provided. Participant 16 stated that they could not see themselves committing suicide because it would be "dishonorable" to their family. Participant 1 admitting to having prior suicidal ideation during a period of their life. Finally, Participant 10 identified suicide as a cowardly act committed to provide a "permanent solution to a temporary problem" but also stated "I actually went through a period where I wanted to commit suicide".

Several participants suggested that there is always another option and the action of taking your own life is a selfish act. Participant 12 stated that over time he has developed an understanding of suicide as a choice as the result of a family members attempt. Those who offered a more sympathetic view on suicide were more closely associated with suicide either through their own lives or the lives of family or friends. Four of the participants suggested that those who died by suicide should have gotten assistance with their mental health issues.

**10. What are your thoughts about those who die as a result of suicide?**

The predominant thought offered by the sample participants can be summarized with one word, “why”? Questions were posed by the majority of the sample as to why suicide was seen as an option and how it could be prevented in the future. Participant 18 stated, “. . .you replay more of the why scenario. You kind of feel like well what if I would have talked to them or you feel like you could have done something tangible to make that happen.” Six of the participants reported that they believed those who died by suicide could have received help. Participant 23 stated, “I guess they felt like they had nowhere else they could turn, nobody they could go to. That was their only escape, their only way out.”

Participant 15 offered some understanding in his response by stating, “I don’t necessarily think of it as a selfish reason to do it. I don’t think that is something that they are processing at the time.” Participant 10 responded with a statement that appeared to offer understanding and then associated a negative connotation with the act of suicide. Participant 10 stated, “I personally feel that they are unable to handle their stress, unable to cope with their day to day life. I honestly believe that they are cowards, I really do.” Finally, participant 25 thought for a moment and then responded, “I wouldn’t know how to answer that” as this concept had never been considered.

**11. What is your perception of police culture related to seeking help for mental health issues?**

The sample participants had clear ideas about existing police culture as it relates to seeking help for mental health issues with the common idea being, “stay silent and do your job” (Participant 14). The sample despite its early introduction to the law

enforcement culture were able to identify specific issues that exist in the law enforcement culture. Participant 1 stated, “I think a lot of times things kind of go and are swept under a rug and obviously at some point it becomes too late...”.

Three students referenced the Type A personality or personality traits associated with law enforcement officers as being part of the issue. Participant 13 stated law enforcement officers are, “...A type personalities and they want to be in charge and in control of everything around them...I would imagine that for someone feeling stress, feeling the pressure of suicide they probably don’t want to reach out for help.” Participant 12 referenced how suicidal ideation or traumatic stress symptoms may be missed. Participant 12 stated, “I kind of understand within this career field how some might go completely unnoticed because they learn to be hard, to be a protector so well that they don’t want to I guess burden someone else with their problems.”

Being in control is a common cultural trait associated with law enforcement officers according to the sample population. A lack of control was then associated by the sample participants with law enforcement officers seeking mental health treatment. Participant 17 stated, “If they see you getting help they’re like oh maybe I don’t want to work with that guy there’s no telling like when he might flip out or not respond the way you need them too.” Participant 18 went further to state that, “I think it’s almost looked at as a sign of weakness if you are talking to people” and that officers who are in therapy will be doubted by their peers.

While peer support was reported during the formal interview as a significant resource for coping with the stressors of a law enforcement career by the majority of the sample, Participant 10 stated, “I don’t think that police officer’s are one of those that

would say hey, I need help.” Participant 11 stated, “They don’t talk about it, they don’t talk amongst themselves about it.” These statements suggest that a request for support may not be readily made and therefore it may have to be proactively offered.

**12. What type of support or treatment for mental health do you perceive is the most beneficial?**

The sample population had a clear preference for the use of mental health support and treatment that does not include a professional source. Peer support and family members are likely to be heavily relied upon during their law enforcement career. Participant 19 states the support systems believed to be most beneficial are, “family, close friends, and if family can’t help you, I think you should get some professional help. Participant 12 states “, vigilance in our peers and catching it early” is a valuable tool which could be exploited by law enforcement agencies to mitigate stress responses.

Recognizing that peer supporters and family members will likely be the first line of defense to identify and mitigate stress responses should provide agencies with a clear resource they could use to conduct an early intervention with officers. Participant 5 and 21 reiterated the importance of speaking with someone who had a shared experience such as a peer with seniority in the field because they would “understand your situation” (Participant 5).

Professional services offered through licensed clinicians were recognized as a beneficial source of support or treatment but some clear caveats were offered by the sample population. Participant 15 summed up the basic sentiment of the sample population, “I think it should be a cop with a psych degree. I hate to say it like that but someone that knows the job knows what they are going through”. Participant 6 stated that

sometimes you may go to the supervisor for help but, “they don’t know how so they pawn you off on a shrink who maybe has very, very, little experience.”

The sample population suggested that the credibility of the professional service provider will be heavily scrutinized by working law enforcement officers. While academic credentialing may suffice for the general public, the perception of the sample population is that law enforcement officers know that the real world does not always work like the book says and they want to know that a provider understands law enforcement culture and the type of stress experienced. Participant 2 stated, “Some people don’t even get help from their shrinks. They think they are idiots most of the time and get their help from family and fellow officers. I think that you need somebody who could relate to them for sure.”

Participant 8 offered the single response that suggested that, “sometimes you just need to either step away from what’s going on for a minute or a little while.” While not interesting on its own, the lack of its suggestion by other members of the sample seems telling. Type A personalities are highly dedicated to their mission and do not accept failure regularly. They are very often unlikely to recognize when a break may be appropriate or when burnout may occur during their career.

**13. What type of education and/or training do you believe is beneficial to addressing the needs of your birth cohort as it relates to mental health and suicide?**

The sample population consistently stated there was a need for training on signs, symptoms, coping, stress management, and intervention techniques. Three members of the sample suggested that mental health training needed to start early in their careers

which would establish a base level of knowledge. Six members of the sample stated that even basic “awareness” level training would be helpful because mental health of law enforcement officers is not discussed in the culture. Five members of the sample suggested that they needed to know as Participant 17 stated, “the signs that might show up, where they can point people too, who they can report it too”.

Participant 14 included a simple answer that is significant due to the nature of law enforcement culture. Law enforcement has long been referred to as a “brotherhood” with references being made to the “thin blue line” being family. However, Participant 14 stated that law enforcement officers need to know, “. . .that you’re not alone in any of this, and you’re always able to ask for help” indicating that there is a perception of isolation when it comes to reporting and managing mental health issues within law enforcement.

**14. What do you believe is needed to reduce the stigma associated with mental health treatment within law enforcement?**

The reduction of stigma within the law enforcement culture is likely to remain a significant issue for the millennial generation law enforcement academy recruits. Multiple suggestions of how to reduce the stigma associated with mental health treatment were provided by the sample population. Law enforcement agencies need to be cognizant that, “If you have people who are in charge who believe that you just need to suck it up and get over it, the problem is just going to continue.” (Participant 21). The change in culture must include awareness, acceptance, and action that shows, “the department is not willing to give up” (Participant 9) on law enforcement officers seeking mental health treatment for cumulative or traumatic stress.

A perception of isolation was reported by five members of the sample population. Participant 12 stated, “If you erase or smudge, I guess the title, or the description of it (mental health issues) being a lesser trait, probably make it easier to be spoken about.” Without a change in perception, the sample suggests that law enforcement officers are likely to feel isolated even among their peers.

Finally, for professional mental health resource providers, Participant 16 suggests that, “if you are around enough and you get someone comfortable eventually they will start talking about what’s in the closet.” This is consistent with earlier interview statements by sample participants indicating credibility and a clear understanding of the police culture will be needed before a therapist will be considered a reliable source of support by many. Consistent interaction with law enforcement officers prior to their need for a professional service is perceived as a method in which to develop a relationship between offices and professional therapist.

### **15. Is there anything else you would like to add?**

The option to provide a free thought response into mental health in law enforcement, as they perceive it offered up several thoughts that would have been missed without this question. While some the majority of the responses were more appropriate as responses to previous questions one statement, in particular, was insightful and seemed to summarize the current law enforcement culture. Participant 1 stated, that there was a perception that if law enforcement officers speak about mental health or stress-related issues that they may be punished. “I don’t want to lose my badge, I don’t want to be on light duty, I don’t want to get suspended until I’m better, I don’t want to” (Participant 1).

Some version of this statement is commonly presented by law enforcement officers as to why they suppress mental health issues and decline to seek treatment.

### **Themes Overview**

The five themes were developed through the analysis of the formal interview process with the sample participants. These themes emerged as a result of patterns or ideas that were emphasized during the interviews and identified during multiple readings of the interview transcripts. NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to assist in the coding process.

#### **Theme 1: A lack of knowledge and understanding is prevalent among the sample.**

While Participant 7 recognized that law enforcement officers are often called to handle things “that just normal people can’t deal with on a regular basis,” which leads to stress at work, the lack of knowledge about police stress and suicide, in general, is significant. “Nobody really talks about it” (Participant 2). The work experience and academic education level of each participant varied considerably (Table 1), but a common lack of knowledge was seen throughout the majority of the sample with 40% of the sample relating that they had no knowledge about the issue of suicide within the law enforcement career field and another 48% stating they only had some knowledge of the issue. This lack of knowledge likely adds to the incorrect beliefs that continue to support stigma associated with mental health.

Thirty-six percent of the sample reported a negative connotation associated with suicide. Primarily participants agreed that suicide is a “very self-centered act” (Participant 2) and “the cowards way out” (Participant 10). This suggests the participants

view suicide as a choice made by a logical individual. Additionally, suicide is clearly seen as a weakness by most of the recruits entering the career field. Socialization, peer networking, and supervision who do not understand mental health likely reinforce this mentality.

However, a few recruits had a much more personal insight like Participant 1 who stated: “Suicide I think I understand it because I’ve been there, you know where I’ve had that thought in the back of my head.” Participant 9 further explained that “Some people just can’t handle what they have gone through and may not be able to reach out to somebody to relieve the burden of what they have to go through on a daily basis.” Participant 21 suggested, “Good people kill themselves over small things.” These individuals reported more direct experience with suicidal ideation or completion in themselves, family, or friends which likely resulted in their increased acceptance and understanding of stress and suicide in general.

**Theme 2: Participants can recognize and identify multiple sources of operational stress but did not list organizational stressors.**

Participants identified multiple sources of stress associated with working as a law enforcement officer. The dynamic environment in which officer’s work was recognized by many participants as a significant source of stress with Participant 4 stating, “You know it’s the unknown that scares people.” Finding a balance between home and work, threats of violence and concerns of making a mistake at work were also identified by the participants. Organizational stressors, such as unfair punishment, lack of reward, administrative review, and low morale; which are often identified by working law enforcement officers as a significant source of stress (Brown, Fielding & Grover, 1999)

were not recognized by the recruited sample as a source of stress related to working as a law enforcement officer.

**Theme 3: Participants state a significant reliance on peer and family support will be used to address work-related stress.**

Two separate sources of support were identified by the majority of sample participants. Family (64%) and peer support (68%) were identified as the primary sources of support for the sample participants. While professional therapy and inpatient services were mentioned by the sample, there appears to be some significant resistance already present within the recruits to speaking to individuals outside the guild. Those who made of mention speaking to professional therapist insisted that they be well versed in law enforcement culture and the issues that are prominent as a result of cumulative and traumatic stress. Participant 15 stated, “I think it should be a cop with a psych degree...because a therapist from the outside whose never been in law enforcement...they can’t see what they have done on the road.”

**Theme 4: Sample participants are already well aware of police culture and mental health stigma that exists within the career field.**

Despite my attempt to obtain information early in their training and socialization to mitigate the influences of law enforcement on the sample population, the majority of the sample were able to identify issues associated with mental health treatment and the stigma associated with treatment in the law enforcement career field. Participant 1 states, “I think that a lot of times there is that perception...especially being new to law enforcement do you have anxiety attacks do you have panic attacks. Have you ever been

depressed? It makes you feel like well if I say yes to this, I'm not going to be accepted into this career field.”

Both suppression efforts and fear of being identified as seeking mental health treatment were given as potential pitfalls that would inhibit or prevent mental health treatment. When discussing a current law enforcement officer, he knows well and reveres, Participant 2 states, “if he was disturbed by something he would be too prideful a lot of the times to admit it and I feel like maybe he would hold it in.” Sample participants stated that current officers would suppress the need to seek help because they did not want to be seen as weak by their peer group. Participant 8 summed up the samples concept in police cultures view of mental health by saying, “I think they feel like they have to be the tough guys and that they should just deal with it on their own and that if they want to talk to somebody, they'd be looked down upon.”

Additionally, the sample questioned the reliability of a peer who had been treated for mental health issues and if they could be relied upon to respond appropriately under pressure. Speaking of a fictional officer who had received mental health treatment, Participant 4 states, “you don't want to be on patrol and... you get on scene, and you're like all right is he going to go into a psychotic breakdown when I need him to be focused.” Participant 2 suggests that mental health treatment is avoided because “They don't want to have other fellow officers looking down on them or doubting them whenever a situation comes up...do I want them behind me when they are unsure.” The fact that this was identified by law enforcement academy recruits early in their training is troubling since this suggests that early introduction of mental health training in the

academy setting will need to be significantly reinforced to overcome the social stigma that is present from their prior experience and view of the topic.

**Theme 5: Universally there is a desire for more information on stress and suicide awareness and intervention strategies.**

Universally, sample participants stated that more awareness level training was needed. Participants stated they needed to know how to respond to a peer in need of mental health assistance. Participant 6 summed up the inability to take action as being a challenge by stating, “I don’t know how I would feel if somebody came to me and said I don’t think I can handle life anymore.” Some participants suggested that this training needed to begin in high school or earlier if society hopes to remove the stigma associated with mental health issues in the general population. Training was also requested during basic academy coursework with refresher training being provided throughout the entirety of the career.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Introduction**

This generation has already reported more mental health issues than any previous generation in history. With a full career spanning more than 20 years ahead of them, these recruits must be prepared for the stress and mental trauma associated with the work environment. Improving the understanding of millennial generation recruits will allow researchers, law enforcement supervisors, trainers, and the officers themselves to better recognize the needs of this generation of law enforcement officer.

Themes were developed from the factors the millennial generation law enforcement recruits identified when discussing their perception of stress and suicide they had experienced directly or had observed as a third party. Although each participant presented unique experience and education as related to the topic, common themes emerged among the cohort which should be used to direct policy and training throughout the State of Florida.

A critical literature review provided the basis for the research, although in some aspects the literature is limited by sample populations that cross generational lines and have been influenced by extensive field experience. The sample population for this research comes from a single generational population spanning 20 years. This generation has seen the rise of technology which provides more information and better communication than any other time in history but also decreases interpersonal connection and reliance on other people.

Five themes emerged (lack of knowledge, coping and support, police culture and mental health stigma, and desire for more information) in this study and were present in

the majority of cases. While individuals with increased military service and educational experience had an increased level of knowledge on the topic, some of the knowledge they had was anecdotal in nature and was not grounded in research. While confident in their beliefs about stress, mental health, and suicide they were still often misinformed.

### **Interpretation**

The present study seeks to expand the understanding of millennial generation law enforcement recruits by identifying their perceptions of suicide and stress within the career field. I sought to increase this understanding by answering two research questions which were used to guide the study:

RQ 1: What are the perceptions of millennial-aged Florida Law Enforcement Basic Recruit Academy students of the need for mental health training in the reduction of law enforcement officer stress and suicide?

RQ 2: What are the perceptions of millennial-aged Florida Law Enforcement Basic Recruit Academy students of the need for mental health training in the reduction of the cultural stigma associated with mental health treatment within the law enforcement career?

While these research questions were posed separately, the answers provided by the sample population are interwoven and must be considered in context with each other. Training which reduces stress and suicide is also likely to reduce the cultural stigma associated with requesting or receiving mental health treatment and vice versa. The themes identified through this study suggest a lack of current knowledge and misunderstandings about mental health and suicide within law enforcement and a desire

to know more. The need for training on this topic extends beyond the individual officer to peers, family, and professional practitioners.

The sample population's responses during the formal interviews suggest that stigma towards mental health treatment and those who seek it is already present within those who are attracted to the law enforcement career field. While I am unable to generalize this for the entire population due to the limited sample size, such consistent findings are unlikely to become significantly more varied if a study on this topic using a large randomly selected sample of the law enforcement population was conducted.

Sixty-four percent of the sample suggested that their family would be a significant support system in which they could confide. While this is likely true, it is common for law enforcement officers to shield their loved ones from the harsher realities of a career in law enforcement by not telling them everything that occurs during a shift. Participant 15 stated, "I've heard a lot of people say that they don't want their significant other to know what goes on at work so they rely a lot on their shift mates." As such, while the family may want to continue to support their law enforcement officer and the officer may need their help they are unable to do so as they are not privy to some of the most traumatic situations that lead to mental health issues. Additionally, while the family is likely to want to help their law enforcement officer, they may be ill-equipped to recognize and help manage cumulative and traumatic stress reactions. Family members who are not also law enforcement officers may lack insight into police culture, signs and symptoms of police stress, and available resources both within and outside the agency that can assist with managing mental health issues.

Peer support was highly reported as a significant source of support with 68% percent of the sample stating that it would be helpful. Peer support was seen as automatically credible by the sample participants because their peers would have similar experience and therefore were assumed to understand the individual seeking assistance better. “You lean on them more than anything because I don’t think anybody else is going to know what they are talking about unless you have been in the field” according to Participant 19.

While this relatability and common background may be beneficial, it could also be problematic as both the person seeking assistance and the peer supporter may view issues through a similar lens creating an inability to find viable ways of reframing events or recognizing alternatives which may improve mental health and resilience. Trained supporters who know both the possibilities and limitations of peer support may be able to both stabilize and assist in the referral of officers in need of mental health services if warranted “because they see you every day and they see what you see they deal with it as well” (Participant 23).

Professional therapy was mentioned by some members of the sample. However several limitations were placed on those seen as being credible enough to provide assistance to law enforcement officers. Academic credentialing alone was not perceived as enough qualification to provide treatment for law enforcement officers. A background in law enforcement work or significant efforts from the mental health professional to understand the nuances of police culture is likely to be needed before even the millennial officers would be willing to request services. Additionally, assurance of confidentiality was a significant concern for many in the sample. Mental health professionals must be

seen as both part of the culture and a separate entity, not overseen by law enforcement administration if they are to be trusted.

Overcoming the mindset that recruits arrive at the academy with will require effective and consistent training efforts from all academy instructors as well as reinforcement by field training officers and supervisors. Early introduction of the concepts of mental health is imperative, but these concepts can be overcome if they arrive at their agency only to be told to “forget everything you learned in the academy, this is how we do it on the street.” Agency policy will need to reflect the commitment to the mental health survival of law enforcement officers. The commitment to establish trained peer supporters, training of family members and the introduction of mental health professionals will be needed to complete a cultural change within a law enforcement agency.

### **Context**

This is the first research study on millennial generation law enforcement recruits that uses qualitative research to obtain an understanding of their perceptions of stress and suicide prior to entering the career field full time. While the small sample size and limited geographic disbursement of the participants may limit some variation in response, consistent themes emerged throughout the study, which offers insight into potential issues in current training, policy, and procedures.

The millennial generation is more open to discussing mental health issues than previous generation. Most members of previous generations of law enforcement officers have a consistent perception that “...the tasks associated with seeking help from a mental health professional, such as relying on others, admitting a need for assistance, or

recognizing and labeling an emotional problem, run contrary to those characteristics which make a successful police officer” (Wester, Arndt, Sedivy, & Arndt, 2010). This stigma is so powerful in the existing law enforcement culture that even if the officer recognizes the need for mental health assistance they are unlikely to seek help.

### **Implications**

The findings of the study have significant implications for law enforcement training, policy, and procedures.

1. Law enforcement officers are in need of additional mental health and resilience training to be included in the academy. While ideally, recruits would come to the academy with basic mental health concepts already in place, the data obtained from the sample population suggests that this is not the case. Misunderstandings about stress symptoms, responses, and treatment were apparent in the responses of the sample.

Awareness level training which includes signs, symptoms, diagnosis and treatment should be mandatory for all law enforcement officers. Participant 12 suggests that the “vigilance in our peers and catching it early” would be beneficial for treatment, but this requires them to be aware of signs and symptoms that present themselves when a person is overly stressed. Additionally, providing this training would give law enforcement officers sense of control which is a critical part of their persona.

Participant 10 when speaking of the usefulness of peers as early identifiers of stress, “They are with you every day. They see the changes when you don’t.” Increasing knowledge and having a standard response should reduce stigma and increase use of mental health preventative services. Additionally, it could help reduce the number of officers who can slip through the cracks as Participant 12 relates, “I kind of understand

within this career field how some might go completely unnoticed because they learn to be hard, to be a protector so well that they don't want to I guess burden someone else with their problems.”

Law enforcement officers feel the need to be in control and the inability to recognize or control traumatic stress symptoms perpetuates the stress response. It is the fear of the unknown that increases stress. Reducing the unknown by ensuring officers understand how they will be handled and that recovery is possible will provide a certain level of control. Additionally, understanding that early intervention such as critical incident stress debriefings and peer support can provide a sense of empowerment (Durkin, 2012) following a traumatic incident leading to improved mental health outcomes.

2. Peer support was the number one source identified by millennial generation law enforcement officers for support. This could be a significant source for changing police culture. While peer support has been used in both formal methods, such as critical incident stress debriefings, and informally, such as personal conversations amongst agency members, the effectiveness of such support is likely tied to the ability of the peer to identify the potential for a mental health issue.

Peer supporters who are unable to identify officers in need of support or recognize the signs and symptoms that are pre-incident indicators of suicide will not be effective at best and may miss significant indicators of traumatic stress symptoms or suicidal ideation at worst. However, trained peer supporters who have direct contact with officers on a daily basis are in a distinct position to recognize what is normal in an individual and

therefore have the potential to note changes in attitude, behavior, or stress levels which may be indicators of possible issues resulting from cumulative or traumatic stress.

In an effort to increase awareness and improve support for officers multiple layers of training and personnel must be in place. All officers need a minimum of awareness level training on the concepts of cumulative and traumatic stress as well as suicide. Designated peer support officers who have received additional training on the topic of crisis intervention should be readily identified resources for officers. Finally, officers should have the support of a local and credible mental health professional who is available to assist with imminent threats as well as provide long-term services outside the scope and expertise of peer supporters.

3. Law enforcement families are likely to be significant sources of support for officers suffering from cumulative and traumatic stress. As the number two source of support identified by the sample population, families will likely be expected to provide support on a daily basis throughout a career but especially following a traumatic event. Also, since the family is going to have consistent contact with the officer, their observations could be key in early identification of officers who are in need of mental health services. Family members who are most likely to be in positions of support should be offered training through their local agency on topics of signs and symptoms of stress as well as potential indicators of suicidal ideation.

However, participant 13 stated, "I feel like most law enforcement officers are A-type personalities and they want to be in charge and in control of everything around them which is good, the way it should be I would imagine that for someone feeling stress, feeling the pressure of suicide they probably don't want to reach out for help. They just

want to fix themselves”. This may prove problematic for family members who have identified an issue and are too timid to challenge the officer or address the agency directly for fear of reprisal on the officer. Families should be provided with pre-identified resources within and outside the law enforcement agency where they can report significant changes in behavior and seek help if they believe it is required.

4. Mental health professionals seeking to work with law enforcement officers face significant challenges. Law enforcement is a closed world, and its members are suspicious of anyone outside the field. Additionally, the fear of losing their jobs is a significant source of resistance to initiating the first contact with a mental health professional.

The sample population identified the need for mental health professionals to be credible in the field of law enforcement and that academic credentialing alone would not be sufficient for them to believe that they understood. This will require either mental health workers who are prior or current law enforcement officers, or more likely mental health workers who have spent significant time in the agency and the field building relationships and credibility with line level officers. For the therapist, “working with these tough guys takes skill, dedication, and sometimes a strong stomach, but for therapists who are not afraid to tough it out themselves, this can be a fascinating and rewarding aspect of clinical practice” (Miller, 1995 p. 599).

5. Agency policy must begin to reflect not only the need but the active practice of improving mental health for law enforcement officers early in their career. A reduction in mental health injuries is likely reduce used sick time, workers compensation claims, and

turnover. Significant resources and efforts are dedicated to training new officers so retention efforts should be a high priority for all agencies.

Policy that clearly identifies process in place for mental health assistance, reporting requirements, and available resources are needed in each agency. Officers who are trained to be in control at all times must feel like they have a sense of control in the way mental health is managed and this starts with knowing exactly what will happen if they request assistance. Additionally, peer supporters and family members must know that agency policy mandates support for officers in need of mental health assistance so they do not feel the need to conceal or not refer an individual in need to a mental health professional.

Policy that mandates attendance formal critical incident debriefings for officers following a traumatic call for service could reduce the stigma associated with asking for assistance. Automatic follow up a few days after a critical incident and prior to anniversary dates by known and credible mental health professionals would provide officers with a resource that comes to them and does not require anyone to ask for additional assistance.

6. Formal mentoring programs which are established and supported by the agency may allow new officers to adapt to their new environment more rapidly and may increase their long term resilience through the early establishment of a clear connection between the abstract and functional reality. Formal mentoring programs have been shown to increase organizational commitment, increase job satisfaction and reduce stress.

Additionally a notable benefit to the agency is that the inclusion of a formal mentorship

program is its ability to reduce turnover (Farnese, Bellò, Livi, Barbieri, & Gubbiotti, 2016).

### **Limitations**

Several limitations exist in conducting this type of research that may affect the potential usefulness of the study's results. While qualitative research designs allow for a more complete review of the phenomenon being researched, the design is subject to the sample population being forthcoming with honest responses that can be evaluated. Understanding the limitations of the design will allow both researchers and readers to assess the findings of this research in context.

Limitations include the inability to generalize results to the population as a whole. However, qualitative research does not seek to generalize results; rather qualitative research works to provide a distinctive interpretation of the phenomena within a particular context (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). Although the sample population is from training centers within the State of Florida, the results may still apply to law enforcement recruits found throughout the country as well as provide direction for future research in the criminal justice and psychological fields.

In-person interviews may limit participant honesty. A participant may be reluctant to discuss mental health and suicide since there is still significant stigma throughout the public as well as within the law enforcement field. In an attempt to ensure complete answers are gathered during this research the following procedures were used with all sample participants:

1. Participants were allowed time to have any questions or concerns about the research study addressed.

2. Participants were allowed adequate time to respond to all questions presented during the interview.

3. Participants were advised that breaks can be taken at any stage during the process.

Time availability may have caused sample participants to rush their responses in an attempt to complete the interview process. The sample population's time availability can be affected by both personal and professional scheduling conflicts. I attempted to address this by scheduling appointments at the convenience of the sample participant.

Law enforcement at best is a closed field of work that is not often accessible by those outside the career field. Any research into this world requires the researcher to gain the confidence of participants. Law enforcement officers are trained throughout the academy to be wary of anyone who has not been vetted. Recruits are also heavily influenced by the socialization that occurs during law enforcement training (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010). These recruits may find a survey and interview addressing their knowledge and opinions of mental health needs in a law enforcement career intrusive in nature or a threat to their future career. As a result, the recruits may feel internal pressure to answer in a manner in which they believe a law enforcement officer should respond.

The sample for this research study is small and purposely selected to match the demographic ratios observed in the population of full-time law enforcement officers in the State of Florida. I believe it is useful to ensure matched groups and an equivalent ratio of the officers in the State of Florida. However, generalization is not possible with such a small sample size but obtaining representative information from the variety of racial and

gender sources will be beneficial to the study by providing a broader spectrum of data from participants.

The researcher may significantly influence the results. Personal bias may affect the collection, reporting, and interpretation of the data collected. Use of a written questionnaire to guide the interview process should assist in ensuring consistent data is collected from the sample participants. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed for entry into qualitative analysis software. Common themes should be seen amongst the cohort due to age, although some variation is expected between racial and gender groupings. Interview responses among and between the sample participants can be compared and contrasted to ensure relative consistency. NVivo was used to analyze data gathered from participant interviews for themes. Computer data analysis allows for better work product as it will limit human error in identifying common words or themes within the participant interviews.

While I attempted to identify law enforcement academy recruits early in their training process in an effort to reduce the amount of influence that socialization may have on the participant, a level certain of stigma is an awareness of police culture is already present in recruits as they enter the academy. Prior experience with work or mental health issues has predisposed some of the sample to the stigma found in the general population. Other members of the population, while not directly influenced by personal experience have definite opinions on the topic of mental health and suicide as a result of their understanding on the topic even if that understanding is not reflective of the current state of knowledge.

A significant number of recruits had prior military experience, which was expected as the line of work commonly draws veterans. An estimated 22% of state and local law enforcement officers have prior military experience while the veteran population makes up only 8% of the total workforce in the United States (Lewis & Pathak, 2014). The United States military has made a concerted effort to reduce mental health stigma and overall suicides within their ranks (Cornum, Matthews, & Seligman, 2011). The result has been members who have a higher level of awareness and decreased level of stigma (Hoge et al, 2015). Their prior training on mental health, suicide, and resilience was an observable feature of their answers, and their knowledge should make them an asset to their agency. While the work completed by the military in reference to resilience and mental health may not directly translate to civilian law enforcement, it does provide a basis from which agencies can model their own mental health program. Additionally, the lessons the military has learned through trial and error can be avoided by law enforcement agencies as they work to develop a viable program.

While the information obtained during the interviews was valuable, the time that occurred between my introduction to the class and the actual interview of the participant proved problematic. Law enforcement officers and those training in the field are inquisitive by nature, and as such, some conducted internet searches on the researcher while awaiting interview. My prior law enforcement experience and current work on traumatic stress and promotion of law enforcement mental health and suicide awareness is readily available through an internet-based search engine. Information obtained from sites I am affiliated with may have influenced participant perceptions and responses since they knew both whom I was and the topic of the research prior to formal interview.

Finally, this research provides only a snapshot of the sample participant's perceptions at a specific point in not only their life but also their law enforcement career. Socialization is a powerful influencer within the law enforcement world. Recruits who find work in progressive agencies with existing mental health policies and peer support programs are likely to see mental health as less of a significant issue as opposed to those who begin work within jurisdictions without these resources. Agencies who decline to address mental health may, in fact, change the perceptions of newly hired recruits causing them to attempt to suppress stress symptoms and avoid managing mental health issues.

### **Future Directions**

Future research in this area is needed. Qualitative research in the area of suicide is lacking (Stanley et al., 2015), and as such set the direction for this current project. However, this research looks at a particular population and may not be reflective of the other generations working in law enforcement. While we have a significant amount of knowledge in the area of suicide, we lack understanding, and this could identify prevention methods not currently in use.

Those who work in law enforcement are undoubtedly different from the civilian population and even attempts to compare them the other first responders or military members fails to provide insight as to what twenty plus years of not knowing when someone might harm you does to the mind and body. While all first responder's frequent emergency scenes which have the potential to generate significant levels of physical and psychological stress, at this time law enforcement is alone with facing consistent threats of violence done to their person or that of their partner. Couple the threat of violence with the other sources of stress associated with a law enforcement career such as

organizational stressors, it is expected that those within this field live in a toxic environment that can affect their ability to cope with stress.

A mixed methods study of similar fashion to the current study could connect both knowledge and understanding of the millennial generation. Gathering statistical data which includes detailed background demographics, the use of survey material such as the GAD-7 (Spitzer, Kroenke, Williams, & Löwe, 2006), PHQ-9 (Kroenke, Spitzer, & Williams, 2001), DASS-21(Henry, & Crawford, 2005), and PCL-5 (Blevins, Weathers, Davis, Witte, & Domino, 2015), combined with qualitative interviews could identify those predisposed to post-traumatic stress injuries within the field. Also, it could identify resilience factors found in the career field population. The ability to generalize this study to the population would also make this an authoritative source of information.

Additionally, a cohort study that follows recruit officers from the selection process until the end of their career could provide an enormous treasure trove of data. It would allow researchers not only to identify traumatic incidents throughout a career in almost real time rather than backward-looking but could also identify specific times in which preventative measures could be inserted into the career to ensure longevity and improve mental health.

Functional magnetic resonance imaging of officers as they entered the law enforcement profession and then taken at specified intervals or following significant events throughout a career could provide detailed physical changes in the brain tied to cumulative and traumatic stress events. Observing these changes could provide researchers with clear physical signs correlated with mental health symptoms that could be used to identify those in need of appropriate interventions.

**Summary**

“I think the culture change is coming... Some places are starting to improve counseling and mental health evaluation, but I still think that there is a fear of losing your job or being looked at as untrustworthy if you have suicidal thoughts” (Participant 21) seemed to synthesize the overall belief of the sample participants. While a change in police culture appears to have begun, there is much work to be done. Operational stress injuries and suicide remain a significant threat to law enforcement officers across the country. Providing officers with an early introduction to mental health maintenance and ongoing refresher training can be a catalyst for change within the law enforcement career field. Continued research which follows officers throughout the entirety of a career and looks for correlation between the internal physical changes of the brain and outward mental health symptoms could be the key to earlier intervention strategies and the long-term reduction of suicide or early retirement due to operational stress injuries.

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Appendix A

Demographic Information Form

## Demographic Information Form

*Instructions:* Please provide a response for each of the following questions:

1. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What is your sex? Female  Male  Other: \_\_\_\_\_
3. With which racial or ethnic category do you identify?  
African American  Asian/Pacific Islander  Caucasian  Latino   
Other: \_\_\_\_\_
4. If applicable, how many years of experience as a first responder do you have?  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. If applicable, how many years of military service do you have? \_\_\_\_\_
6. What is the highest level of education you have completed?  
GED/Equivalent  High School  Associate  Bachelor   
Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix B

Interview Questions

## Interview Questions

16. What experience do you have as a first responder or member of the military?
17. What does stress mean to you?
18. What particular events in your life have caused you to feel the most stressed?
19. How do you currently manage or cope with stress?
20. What would you identify as sources of stress related to working as a law enforcement officer?
21. What would you identify as sources of support related to working as a law enforcement officer?
22. What is your current level of knowledge about the prevalence of suicide within the law enforcement career field?
23. What are your thoughts on suicide?
24. What are your thoughts about those who die as a result of suicide?
25. What is your perception of police culture related to seeking help for mental health issues?
26. What type of support or treatment for mental health do you perceive is the most beneficial?
27. What type of education and/or training do you believe is beneficial to addressing the needs of your birth cohort as it relates to mental health and suicide?
28. What do you believe is needed to reduce the stigma associated mental health treatment within law enforcement?
29. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Table 1

*Demographic Results*

Participant #	Age	Race	Sex	Experience	Education
1	23	W	F	None	High School
2	23	W	M	None	High School
3	26	B	F	1-year military	High School
4	34	W	M	3 years FR	High School
5	33	W	M	2 years military	High School
6	36	W	M	10 years military	Some College
7	33	B	M	6 months FR	Some College
8	20	W	F	None	Some College
9	21	A	M	None	Associate
10	34	O	M	4 years military	High School
11	27	W	M	None	High School
12	34	H	M	3 years FR	High School
13	23	W	M	None	Some College
14	19	B	M	None	High School
15	29	W	F	2 years military	Bachelor
16	21	W	M	None	High School
17	30	W	M	4 years military	Bachelor
18	30	H	M	10 years FR	Bachelor
19	24	B	M	None	High School
20	24	W	F	None	Some College
21	22	W	M	None	High School
22	21	W	M	1-year FR	High School
23	24	B	M	None	High School
24	24	W	F	None	Bachelor
25	25	H	M	None	Some College