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Understanding Personality Changes in Law Enforcement Officers

Jessica Carpenter
Fort Hays State University, jacarpenter2@mail.fhsu.edu

Darin Challacombe
Fort Hays State University, djchallacombe@fhsu.edu

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Introduction

The law enforcement career is one with an ever-evolving set of tasks, opportunities, and threats; individuals who serve in this career often experience significant stress (Craun et al., 2014).

The United States is home to just over 750,000 law enforcement officers (Banks et al., 2016). In 2016, a reported 144 officers died or were killed in career-related situations; an additional 110 committed suicide (Kulbarsh, 2017; Officer Down Memorial Page, 2017).

Temple (2009) found American law enforcement officers’ personal strain/coping were significantly linked to Five Factor Model (FFM) traits, supporting a non-causal connection between stress and personality.

Wills and Schuldberg (2016) found NEO-PI-R trait mean reductions over time in a small sample of law enforcement officers who indicated experiencing post-traumatic stress symptoms.

In Challacombe, Ackerman, & Stones (2019), The authors found significant differences in several FFM traits for both career-related stress and length of service.

Hypothesis

Law enforcement officers will report changes in personality over time.

Who We Contacted

Reddit forum /r/ProtectAndServe
Summit County Ohio
Akron OH PD
Cuyahoga County Ohio
City of Cleveland PD
Cook County Illinois
NYPD Community Affairs
Atlanta PD Public Affairs
Fulton County GA Sheriff’s Office
Douglas County Sheriff’s Office
LAPD
Phoenix AZ PD
Dallas PD
PoliceOne
KCPD
ILEETA
FLEOA

Method

Our grounded theory approach began with open sampling using an anonymous Qualtrics survey posted to various online platforms including Reddit forum /r/ProtectAndServe. The survey included three portions: Demographics, Five Factor Measure/Mini-IPIP, and a Qualitative Questionnaire.

Participants could opt-in for a semi-structured intensive interview via Zoom to explore participants’ experience and concerns. Initial coding contributes to the developing theory.

Subsequent interviews utilized discriminate sampling with the same subjects to reach saturation on aspects of the theory developed through the grounded theory approach.

Limitations

Responses to our anonymous survey were limited. We have approx. 100 responses to the anonymous survey with only 71 (mostly) complete entries.

Participants willing to participate in our subsequent interviews were severely limited. Of those who completed surveys, 19 said they would be willing to participate further but only 5 provided contact information. Of those scheduled, only one interview was successful.

Themes

Initial coding of short answer responses to our qualitative questionnaire.

Q1: What changes in your personality or behavior have you noticed since becoming a law enforcement officer?

- Increased vigilance
- Increased cynicism
- Increased suspicion
- Increased assertiveness
- Increased aggression
- Decreased patience
- Increased Extroversion
- Decreased Extroversion
- Increased empathy
- Increased discipline
- Increased maturity
- Increased bluntness
- Increased pessimism
- Decreased tolerance

Q2: What changes have others mentioned that they have noticed about you?

- Increased vigilance
- Increased apathy
- Increased maturity
- Increased assertiveness
- Increased aggression
- Decreased patience
- Increased Extroversion
- Decreased Extroversion
- Increased cynicism
- Increased reactivity

Q3: Do you believe these changes have altered your personality or behavior?

- 42% answered Yes (25) or Somewhat (5), 22% did not respond (16)
- 22% responded No (16)
- Maybe (1), Unsure (2), Other (6)

Q4: “Do you believe these changes are associated with your responsibilities as a law enforcement officer? Briefly describe these factors.”

- 55% answered Yes (39), 25% did not respond (18)
- 11% responded No (8)
- Probably (1), Maybe (1), Unsure (1), Other (3)

Contact Information:

Jessica Carpenter: jacarpenter2@fhsu.edu
Darin Challacombe: djchallacombe@fhsu.edu