

## A STUDY OF COMPASSION FATIGUE AMONG POLICE OFFICERS

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### ABSTRACT

*Law enforcement officers are chronically exposed to traumatic events and work-related stressors. The consistent exposure to physical, cultural, and psychological stressors may be related to compassion fatigue. The design of this study was non-experimental using survey methods. A non-random sample of 48 police officers was surveyed online to determine their self-reported levels of compassion fatigue and burnout using the Professional Quality of Life Scale 5 (ProQOL 5; Stamm, 2009). In addition, the researcher developed and administered the Societal Stress Survey (SSS) to examine police officers' perceptions of stress related to three areas of stressors identified in the literature: felonious police killings, cultural tension, and negative media coverage. The composite score and the subscale scores on the ProQOL 5 were correlated to the composite and subscale scores on the SSS. Positive, moderate correlations were found between the mean composite compassion fatigue score on the ProQOL and mean SSS subscale scores of felonious police killings ( $r = .468$ ) and negative media coverage ( $r = .507$ ). The mean SSS subscale score on the cultural tension subscale had a strong, positive correlation with the mean compassion fatigue subscale ( $r = .633$ ). Almost 10% of the police officers in this sample reported high levels of compassion fatigue and 21% reported high levels of burnout. Further research is needed to determine and address stressors specific to law enforcement and to prevent the onset of compassion fatigue in police personnel.*

Keywords: compassion fatigue, burnout, police officers, ProQOL 5; cultural tension,

## **Introduction**

Since the 1990s, concerns have grown about the influence of stress and exposure to trauma helping professionals face in the work environment (Figley, 1995). Overwhelming caseloads, conflict with colleagues and clients, the juggle of family life, and lack of time for self-care have negatively influenced emotional, psychological, and physical health among helping professionals (Grunfeld, 2007; Kelly, Runge, & Spencer, 2015; Radey & Figley, 2007; Thomas, 2013). In addition, Thomas (2013) reported that professionals in helping environments are predisposed to developing compassion fatigue, a condition identified as the stress that results from helping others. Symptoms of compassion fatigue include emotional, cognitive, and behavioral changes that can cause problems with performance in both career and personal settings (Thomas, 2013). Physicians, nurses, social workers, and psychotherapists typically fit the category of helping careers. Police officers are not generally viewed as helping professionals as they work to keep the peace, enforce the law, and maintain public safety.

Law enforcement agencies in the United States employ approximately 800,000 police officers a year (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). These public servants embed themselves daily in tense and traumatic circumstances, which may predispose these officers to the development of compassion fatigue (Miller, 2013). Despite officers' commitments to protect and serve, community members have voiced concerns that actions taken by police officers are racially motivated, excessive in force, and demonstrate a lack of understanding of community needs (Jones, 2015). Events related to the use of force by police have been highly publicized by the media, and law enforcement has been widely criticized on social media websites (Klahm, Papp, & Rubino, 2016). Violence toward police officers in the United States has also increased (Department of Justice Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBIDOJ); 2015). Some jurisdictions

report that the growth in violence toward law enforcement officers has influenced a decline in applicants for policing positions (Vibes, 2015).

When public criticism grows, law enforcement officers may experience an increase in fear, anxiety, or stress during situations of conflict, leading to negative reactions as a method of self-protection. The levels of work-related stress and chronic exposure to traumatic situations often lead to symptoms of burnout and compassion fatigue among police officers (Miller, 2013). Stamm (2010) reported that compassion fatigue symptoms influence people's lack of focus and concentration, poor decision making, and apathy.

More research is needed to determine the levels, types, and origins of compassion fatigue among law enforcement officers. The purpose of this non-experimental quantitative study was to examine the rates of compassion fatigue and burnout among law enforcement officers and to determine whether any relationships exist between compassion fatigue and felonious killings of police officers, cultural tension, and media coverage.

### **Brief Review of Literature**

Law enforcement officers are chronically exposed to traumatic incidents involving motor vehicle accidents, shootings, armed robbery, altercations, domestic violence, and events related to abuse of women, children, older adults, and individuals with mental and physical disabilities (Miller, 2015). As public servants, officers are legally and ethically bound to keep the peace and enforce the law (Cross & Ashley, 2004; Karlsson & Christianson, 2003). However, dedication to public service does not come without costs. Early studies of police officers revealed that prolonged exposure to work-related stress and traumatic incidents contributed to irritation, hypervigilance, poor concentration, depersonalization, negativity, hopelessness, and helplessness (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006; Radey & Figley, 2007). Additionally, serious mental health

conditions such as depression and posttraumatic stress disorder may arise due to persistent exposure to trauma (Stamm, 2010).

In 1995, trauma specialist Charles Figley coined the term compassion fatigue, which is sometimes called secondary traumatization. According to Figley (1995), compassion fatigue describes the stress resulting from helping traumatized or suffering persons. Compassion fatigue is generally described as the emotional residue or stress of exposure from working with individuals who have experienced trauma and the consequences of traumatic events (Stamm, 2010). Compassion fatigue can relate to both personal and occupational hazards. The condition can be characterized by deep physical and emotional exhaustion and a marked change in the helper's ability to feel empathy for loved ones, co-workers, and the populations served (Figley, 1995). Common symptoms of compassion fatigue include loss of career enjoyment, increased cynicism in the workplace, absenteeism, physical illness, problems with focus and concentration, difficulty separating work life and personal life, inability to make decisions, increased use of alcohol and drugs, and problems with intimacy in personal relationships (Grunfeld, 2007; Radey & Figley, 2007; Stamm, 2010).

A number of studies have attempted to identify occupational, social, and personal stressors that contribute to the development of compassion fatigue. The larger purpose of these early research studies was to develop strategies for self-care to prevent and alleviate debilitating symptoms among helping professionals (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006; Radey & Figley, 2007). The current research study was designed to examine compassion fatigue and burnout among law enforcement officers and to determine whether any relationships exist between compassion fatigue and police killings, cultural tension, and media coverage.

## **Felonious Killings of Police Officers**

The FBI refers to the intentional death of a police officer as felonious police killing (FBIDOJ, 2015). According to the FBIDOJ (2015), 27 police officers in the United States were killed in the line of duty in 2014; this number increased to 51 deaths in 2015. Of the 51 deaths in 2015, 41 were classified as homicides. Unfortunately, the rate of police officer deaths attributed to homicide continued to rise; in 2016, 79 felonious deaths of police officers were reported to the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBIDOJ, 2016). In 2016, 63 officer deaths were by gunfire, up 62% from 2015; 39 officer deaths were due to felonious shootings (Officer Down Memorial Page, 2016).

Violence towards law enforcement officers raises important concerns for public safety and may influence a decrease in the number of individuals who seek law enforcement careers (Krieger, Chen, Waterman, Kiang, & Feldman, 2015). According to an article by Vibes (2015), police departments throughout the country reported fewer applicants for policing positions; police officers who were surveyed attributed the decline in applicants to decreased community respect for law enforcement and the increase in danger inherent to the job. When the investigator asked about low recruitment rates, many police officers and officials blamed the media for portraying police personnel in a negative light (Vibes, 2015). In the same study, officers noted that violence against law enforcement by community members was a critical area of concern.

In 2015, Malone indicated that the decrease in applicants for policing positions had become a national trend. For example, the Baltimore Police Department reported a decline in applicants for law enforcement positions at an annual regression of 6.1% between 2015 and 2012. Malone (2015) also reported that recruitment in Detroit decreased 4.9% from the previous

year, and El Paso reported a 4.3% decline in applicants. However, no current research was found to indicate that a national trend in reduced numbers of applicants was related to compassion fatigue.

### **Cultural Tensions**

Many citizens are concerned that police officers have targeted minority communities and have used unnecessary or excessive methods of force during arrests. In 2015, researchers at Gallup surveyed a random sample of 1,527 adults to evaluate community confidence in American law enforcement nation-wide (Jones, 2015). The results of the survey revealed that 25% of Americans said they had *a great deal* of confidence in the police; 27% *quite a lot*; 30% *some*; 16% *very little*; and 2% *none*. The combined 18% who had *very little* or *no confidence* in police was the highest percentage Gallup had measured to that point in time. The survey results also revealed that 57% of White Americans indicated positive attitudes about policing; however, African Americans reported only 30% confidence in policing. The results of the 2015 Gallup survey also indicated that respondents' overall confidence ratings of law enforcement dropped by 4% between the years 2013 and 2015 (Jones, 2015).

A number of important studies have been conducted in recent years to determine levels of police bias against minorities. For example, a Harvard study of race and police actions in the United States found that lethal force was used at equal rates toward both White and Black suspects (Fryer, 2017). In a study of crime simulation training by James, James, & Vila (2016), police officers took significantly longer amounts of time to "shoot" armed Black suspects than armed White suspects. In addition, Cullhane, Boman IV, and Schweitzer (2016) found that eye witnesses to the use of police force were more likely to believe that the officers' use of force was justified when the witnesses were able to view footage from officers' body-worn cameras.

## **Media Coverage**

Law enforcement officers have legitimate reasons to be concerned about the public's perceptions of racism, prejudice, and cultural tension in the ranks of its professionals. Violent acts committed by police officers towards citizens from minority groups have been widely publicized, often leading to public demands for investigations into potential racism and prejudice within police departments. According to Klahm, Papp, and Rubino (2016), the police-involved deaths of Walter Scott in South Carolina and Philando Castile in Minnesota prompted demonstrations, protests, riots, and polarization within the community and in unrelated communities. The media responded to officer-involved shootings with full coverage of the cultural tensions between police officers and the communities they served. Public awareness increased dramatically when violent incidents involving law enforcement officers were featured in newspapers, television news programs, and social media posts.

Social media outlets such as Facebook reveal a number of profile pages and posts that expose negative actions and behaviors by both citizens and police officers. The information on these pages is often circulated to the general public, prompting the question: Are police officers dangerous? On July 7, 2016, Michah Xavier Johnson fired upon a group of police officers in Dallas, Texas, wounding seven officers and killing five officers. According to Gillman (2016), just days prior to the shooting, Johnson posted a cartoon of a Black Panther slitting a police officer's throat. Facebook administrators refused to remove the cartoon, stating that the post did not violate Facebook's community standards (Gillman, 2016). Subsequent to the shootings, Dallas police officers responded to threatening media posts by arresting individuals who posted death threats towards officers on social media accounts (Hunter, 2016).

## **Summary**

Any indication of cultural or racial tension is always a concern for citizens and should be carefully studied to find appropriate solutions. Fear and lack of trust relating to community policing are a threat to society as a whole. As such, social science research on the interactions between police officers' personal and professional lives can provide important information leading to improved relationships with the public. Specifically, research related to compassion fatigue and burnout may provide valuable insights into ways to build and maintain community confidence and professionalism among the nation's peace officers.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

Q1: What are the current rates of compassion fatigue and burnout among law enforcement officers?

Q2: What are the relationships between police officers' perceptions of felonious killings of police officers, compassion fatigue, and burnout?

Q3: What are the relationships between police officers' perceptions of cultural tension, compassion fatigue, and burnout?

Q4: Are police officers' perceptions of negative media coverage related to burnout and compassion fatigue?

## **Methods**

After approval by the Internal Review Board at California Southern University, participants for the survey were recruited at partnering law enforcement agencies; commanding officers at ten local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies were invited by email or phone to participate in the study. Of the ten law enforcement agencies contacted, four law enforcement

agencies agreed to participate, including two police departments, one sheriff's department, and one federal police agency. Officers who consented to participate provided their email addresses to indicate their willingness to enroll in the study before receiving a link to the online survey.

Voluntary participation was required and was not a condition of employment.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study consisted of a purposive sample of convenience. To qualify for the study, participants were required to meet specific demographic criteria: subjects had to be currently employed as a police officer, detective, or sheriff's deputy working in a local, state, or federal agency and between the ages of 18 and 65. Fifty-one individuals initially agreed to participate, but 48 officers completed the survey. Respondents varied in age, gender, ethnicity, and years of law enforcement service. All of the officers were US citizens.

### **Instrumentation**

The online survey instrument consisted of the consent form, a demographic inventory, the Professional Quality of Life Scale 5 (ProQOL 5; Stamm, 2009), and the Societal Stress Survey (SSS) designed by the researcher (see Appendix A). Volunteer respondents were asked to complete the survey within two weeks of receiving the survey.

According to Stamm (2010), the first version of the Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL) was developed in 1995 to assess the positive and negative aspects of working in helping settings. Since its inception, the ProQOL has undergone several revisions. The newest version, the ProQOL 5, was published by Stamm in 2009 (see Appendix A). This 30-item survey tool was designed to assess levels of compassion satisfaction, burnout, and compassion fatigue. Items were rated on an interval scale of one to five, with one indicating *never* and five indicating *very often*.

Stamm (2009) described compassion satisfaction as the pleasure derived from the ability to do one's work well. Conversely, burnout and compassion fatigue were described as a collection of negative symptoms that stemmed from the cost of caring in the work environment. Burnout was described as feelings of hopelessness and difficulties in coping with work stress or the inability to perform work effectively. When individuals feel burned out, they often believe their efforts make no difference. Symptoms of burnout generally have a gradual onset. According to Stamm (2010), compassion fatigue is related to exposure to traumatic events in the work environment; symptoms of compassion fatigue are similar to post-traumatic stress disorder: suffering individuals often report sleep difficulties, intrusive reminders of traumatic events, and avoidance behaviors. Because this study focused on police stress, only the scores on the burnout and compassion fatigue subscales on the ProQOL 5 were analyzed.

According to the technical manual for the ProQOL 5 by Stamm (2010), the construct validity of the ProQOL has been established in more than 200 peer-reviewed articles. In addition, the 2009 ProQOL 5 revision of the compassion fatigue scale reduced the known collinearity between compassion fatigue and burnout (Stamm, 2010). The revised version's overlap between subscales was small; the compassion satisfaction subscale included a shared variance of 5% with burnout and 2% shared variance with compassion fatigue. The shared variance between burnout and compassion fatigue was somewhat higher at 21%. According to Stamm (2010), the relationship is likely reflective of distress that is common to both conditions. Stamm (2010) reported the Cronbach alpha reliabilities for the ProQOL 5 instrument as follows: burnout ( $\alpha = .75$ ) and compassion fatigue ( $\alpha = .81$ ), indicating moderate to high levels of internal consistency in the validation sample.

The ProQOL 5 (Stamm, 2009) requires three steps for scoring. The first step is to reverse the coding on certain items because some items indicate workplace satisfaction, while others reflect symptoms of burnout or compassion fatigue. The second step requires totaling the score for each of the subscale categories to obtain the raw score. In the third step, the final scores for each subsection are compared to a table with descriptive definitions. Ranges of scores are presented for all three subscales and then rated as low, average, or high. A score of 22 or less represents low levels of burnout and compassion fatigue; scores between 23 and 41 represent average levels of burnout and compassion fatigue; scores totaling 42 to 50 indicate high levels of burnout and compassion fatigue.

### **Societal Stress Survey**

The second instrument used in the study, the Societal Stress Survey (SSS), was developed by the current researcher to determine police officers' perceived levels of stress in three specific stressor areas: felonious police killings, cultural tension, and negative media coverage (see Appendix B). The criteria for diagnosing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5* (DSM 5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) were utilized to create and validate the SSS survey. Each of the five items on the instrument in each of the three sub-categories of stressors aligns with one of the five DSM 5 criteria of PTSD symptoms: (a) directly experiencing, witnessing, or learning of a traumatic event, (b) recurrent distressing thoughts, (c) persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the traumatic event, (d) negative alterations in cognition and mood associated with the traumatic event, and (e) marked alterations in arousal activity.

Content validity was established by piloting the instrument with 10 master's level mental health clinicians; in addition, a panel of four clinical social workers and six mental health

counselors completed the survey and critiqued it. The health clinicians were asked to review the survey and write down what they thought the survey was designed to measure. All 10 of the clinicians indicated that the survey evaluated stress; nine of the 10 clinicians reported that the survey was designed to measure the five criteria of post-traumatic stress disorder as described in the DSM 5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Responses to the SSS were rated on a Likert scale, with 5 representing *very often*, 4 equaling *often*, 3 corresponding to *sometimes*, 2 equaling *rarely*, and 1 representing *never*. The composite score on the SSS was calculated by adding the scores from the five items on each of the three categories of stressors to obtain the raw scores. Scores were calculated for each stressor category individually; the minimum score for each category was five and the highest score for each category was 25. Raw category scores under 10 represented relatively low levels of stress; scores between 11 and 17 represented moderate levels of stress; scores of 18 or higher indicated moderately high to high levels of stress. The maximum composite score was 75.

The researcher computed Cronbach's alpha to evaluate the reliability of the SSS for this study's sample of 48 law enforcement officers. The resulting alpha was 0.87, indicating high reliability.

## **Results**

The researcher cleaned and compiled the responses to the survey prior to conducting the analyses. The 48 respondents in this sample of law enforcement officers answered all the items; the entire dataset was complete. The demographic composition of the respondents is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Composition of Law Enforcement Officers

Variables	Percentage
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	60.42
Female	39.58
<i>Race</i>	
Caucasian	60.42
Hispanic	25.00
African American	12.50
Other	2.08
<i>Relationship Status</i>	
Married	60.42
Committed Relationship	16.67
Single	14.58
Divorced	8.33
<i>Age</i>	
61 and older	2.08
51-60	20.83
41-50	35.42
36-40	12.50
31-35	8.33
26-30	6.25
18-25	14.58
<i>Employment Type</i>	
Police Officer	50.00
Sheriff's Deputy	33.33
Other	16.67
<i>Years of Service</i>	
21 Years or More	39.58
16 to 20 Years	18.75
11 to 15 Years	16.67
6 to 10 Years	2.08
5 Years or Less	22.92

Note. N=48

Sixty percent of the officers were Caucasian, followed by 25% Hispanic and 12.5% African American. Most of the participants were employed with local agencies (89.35%;  $n = 42$ ). Ages of officers ranged from 18 to more than 61; more than half of the officers (57%) were between the ages of 41 and 61. The majority of officers (60.42%) were married. Years of law enforcement employment varied considerably; more than half the officers (56.25%) worked in

law enforcement more than 16 years. However, almost one-quarter (22.9%) of the officers had been officers five years or less.

### Descriptive Results

Descriptive statistics were computed to examine the survey dataset and to address the research questions. The results are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

*Descriptive Results of Law Enforcement Officers' Survey Responses to the ProQOL 5 and SSS*

Scales	Mean	SD <sup>a</sup>	Scale Range	% High	% Medium	% Low
Compassion Fatigue	28.02	10.36	0-50	9.6% <i>n</i> = 5	50% <i>n</i> = 24	39.5% <i>n</i> = 19
Burnout	30.56	11.02	0-50	20.8% <i>n</i> = 10	29.2% <i>n</i> = 18	41.6% <i>n</i> = 20
Police killings	14.56	4.06	0-25	22.9% <i>n</i> = 11	54.16% <i>n</i> = 26	22.9% <i>n</i> = 11
Cultural Tension	14.46	3.64	0-25	25% <i>n</i> = 12	54.16% <i>n</i> = 26	20.83% <i>n</i> = 10
Media Coverage	18.56	4.21	0-25	56.3% <i>n</i> = 27	41.7% <i>n</i> = 20	2.1% <i>n</i> = 1

*Note.* *N* = 48. <sup>a</sup>Standard deviation. Compassion Fatigue and Burnout Ranges: High=42-50; Medium=23-41; Low=22 or less. SSS Ranges: High=18 or higher; Medium=11-17; Low=10 or less.

### Compassion Fatigue and Burnout

The first research question in this study was: What are the current rates of compassion fatigue and burnout among law enforcement officers? Of the 48 officers who completed the survey, the composite mean score on the ProQOL 5 for compassion fatigue in this sample was 28.02 (out of 50) with a standard deviation of 10.36. One can see that the standard deviation is

quite large, indicating a great deal of variability in the sample. Using the cut points suggested by Stamm (2010), fifty percent ( $n = 24$ ) of the police officers reported average levels of compassion fatigue; 39.5% ( $n = 19$ ) reported low levels; and 9.6% ( $n = 5$ ) of respondents scored high levels of compassion fatigue.

Among the five respondents with high scores in the compassion fatigue category, three were male and two were female. Further, three of the five respondents who reported high levels of compassion fatigue were African American and two were Caucasian. Although the sample was very small, these results should be studied further to determine whether gender and race are related to compassion fatigue. Four of the five high scorers on compassion fatigue were employed as law enforcement officers for 16 to 20 years and one worked in law enforcement for five to ten years. These results may suggest a possible relationship between years of service and the development of compassion fatigue symptoms; the results are similar to the theories of Figley (1995) and Stamm (2010), who found that symptoms of stress are cumulative and tend to magnify over time. In addition, both Figley and Stamm proposed that symptoms of burnout are components or precursors to the development of compassion fatigue.

The ProQOL 5 (Stamm, 2009) was also used in this study to evaluate burnout. Among the 48 respondents, the mean composite score for burnout was 30.56 out of 50 points and the standard deviation was 11.02. Again, the large standard deviation points to large variability in the sample. Using the ProQOL 5's cut points, 41.6% ( $n = 20$ ) of respondents reported low levels of burnout, 29.2% ( $n = 18$ ) reported average levels of burnout, and 20.8% ( $n = 10$ ) of respondents in this sample reported high levels of burnout.

Within the group of officers who reported high levels of burnout ( $n = 10$ ; 20.8%), gender differences were noticeable: eight of the ten respondents were male and two were female. In

addition, among the officers who indicated high levels of burnout, eight of the ten were Caucasian and two were African American. Years of service were disaggregated for this subset of ten respondents in the category of high level of burnout; four of the officers were employed between 16 and 20 years, three were employed for 11 to 15 years, and two were employed for five years or less. These results were similar to the high scores on compassion fatigue.

### **Correlation Results**

Pearson *r* correlations were used to explore the relationships between composite mean scores on the compassion fatigue and burnout subscales from the ProQOL 5 and mean category scores on the SSS in order to address research questions two, three, and four. The results of the analyses are depicted in Table 3 below.

*Table 3*

*Pearson r Correlations between the Subscale Means of SSS Categories and the Composite Means of Compassion Fatigue and Burnout from the ProQOL 5*

Variables	Burnout	Compassion Fatigue	Significance (2-tailed)
Burnout		.775	.000***
Felonious Killings of Police Officers	.415	.468	.003***
Cultural Tension	.569	.633	.000***
Negative Media Coverage	.543	.507	.000***

*Note.* *N* = 48. Compassion Fatigue *M* = 28.02, *SD* = 10.36; Burnout *M* = 30.56, *SD* = 11.02. Felonious killings of police officers *M* = 14.56, *SD* = 4.06; Cultural Tension *M* = 14.46, *SD* = 3.64; Media Coverage *M* = 18.56, *SD* = 4.212.  
*p* < .001.

### **Killing of Police Officers, Compassion Fatigue, and Burnout**

The second question in this research study asked: what are the relationships between police officers' perceptions of felonious killing of police officers, compassion fatigue, and burnout? Of the 48 individuals who completed the survey, the mean composite score of stressors related to killing of police officers was 14.56, with a standard deviation of 4.06. Eleven individuals (22.9%) reported scores of 18 or more, indicating moderately high to high levels of stress related to felonious killings of law enforcement officers. Twenty-six participants (54.16%) reported average levels of stress, and eleven individuals (22.9%) reported low levels of stress associated with felonious killings of police officers.

The Pearson correlation coefficient of  $r = .468$  revealed a positive, moderate correlation between perceptions of killing of police officers and compassion fatigue; the correlation between killing of police officers and burnout ( $r = .415$ ) was also positive and moderate. A two-tailed test of significance was conducted to determine whether any differences existed between the two variables of police killings and compassion fatigue. The result was significant ( $p < .001$ ).

### **Cultural Tension, Compassion Fatigue, and Burnout**

The third research question proposed in the study was: what are the relationships between police officers' perceptions of cultural tension, compassion fatigue, and burnout? Of the 48 individuals who completed the survey, the mean score of stressors related to cultural tension was 14.46 with a standard deviation of 3.64. Twelve officers (25.0%) reported scores of 18 or more, indicating relatively high levels of stress related to officers' perceptions of cultural tension between community members and the police. Twenty-six participants (54.16%) reported average levels of stress, and 10 participants (20.83%) indicated low levels of stress related to cultural tensions between community members and police officers.

The relationship between mean score on the cultural tension category of the SSS and the mean compassion fatigue subscale of the ProQOL 5 was analyzed using a Pearson  $r$  correlation. The resulting Pearson correlation coefficient value of  $r = .633$  demonstrated a positive, moderate correlation between the means of the two variables. The Pearson correlation coefficient between burnout and cultural tension was  $r = .569$ , also demonstrating a positive, moderate correlation between the two variables.

### **Negative Media Coverage, Compassion Fatigue, and Burnout**

The fourth research question asked: Are police officers' perceptions of negative media coverage related to burnout and compassion fatigue? Among the 48 individuals who completed the SSS, the mean score of negative media coverage on the SSS was 18.56 with a standard deviation of 4.21. This score reflected this sample's highest reports of stress among the three categories of the SSS. Twenty-seven individuals (56.25%) reported scores of 18 or more, indicating moderate to high levels of stress. Twenty participants (41.66%) reported average levels of stress related to negative media coverage, and one individual (2.08%) indicated low levels of stress.

The Pearson correlation coefficient value of  $r = .507$  demonstrated a positive, moderate correlation between the officers' mean rating of negative media coverage and their mean score on compassion fatigue. The Pearson correlation coefficient of  $r = .543$  also demonstrated a positive, moderate correlation between officers' ratings of stressors related to negative media coverage and burnout.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this non-experimental quantitative study was to determine the current rate of compassion fatigue and burnout among a sample of police officers and to determine the

relationships between compassion fatigue and burnout on the ProQOL 5 (Stamm, 2009) and the variables of officers' perceptions of killing of police officers, cultural tension, and negative media coverage on the SSS. The researcher surveyed a non-random, purposive sample of 48 police officers who were currently employed as police officers, sheriff's deputies, or federal officers who worked for local, state, and federal agencies; the survey instruments were the ProQOL 5 (Stamm, 2009) and an instrument created by the researcher, the SSS (see Appendix B). The ProQOL measures self-reported measures of compassion fatigue and burnout among the helping professions; the SSS was designed to measure perceptions of stress related to killings of police officers, cultural tension, and negative media coverage of police. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze responses to the survey and to address the research questions.

Results from the ProQOL 5 survey revealed that almost 10% of the 48 officers experienced high levels of compassion fatigue, and 21% of the officers in the study reported high levels of burnout. Correlational analyses were conducted to ascertain the relationships between the variables of interest. The data analyses indicated that the killing of police officers was associated with the lowest level of stress on the SSS. The officers rated negative media coverage as the highest stressor among the three categories of the SSS; 56.25% of officers reported scores on this category indicating high levels of stress.

According to Figley (1995) and Stamm (2010), burnout is a symptom of or precursor to compassion fatigue. This relationship was tentatively verified in the current study; the Pearson  $r$  correlation between the participants' scores on burnout and compassion fatigue was strong ( $r = .775$ ). Further research is warranted since addressing symptoms of burnout in early stages could potentially prevent the development of compassion fatigue.

A second purpose of the study was to determine whether officers' perceptions of stress on the SSS categories were related to scores of burnout and compassion fatigue on the ProQOL 5. Positive, moderate correlations were found between compassion fatigue on the ProQOL and the SSS categories (killing of police officers  $r = .468$ ; cultural tension  $r = .633$ ; negative media coverage  $r = .506$ ). Positive, moderate correlations were also found between burnout scores on the ProQOL 5 and the category scores on the SSS (killing of police officers  $r = .415$ ; cultural tension  $r = .569$ ; and negative media coverage  $r = .543$ ).

Based on the research literature (Krieger et al., 2015; Malone, 2015; Vibes, 2015), the current researcher hypothesized that perceptions of stress related to killing of police officers would yield the highest correlation to compassion fatigue in law enforcement. However, this variable had the lowest correlation to compassion fatigue and burnout compared to the other variables under study. Further research is needed to determine whether similar results would occur in a larger sample of police officers.

In this study, the data revealed that cultural tension was in the midrange of stress on the SSS; however, the cultural tension scores on the SSS presented the strongest correlation with compassion fatigue. The researcher questions why officers reported the lowest levels of stress in the cultural tension category when the highest correlation between that variable and compassion fatigue was uncovered. Perhaps cultural tension is an expectation of police work; further study with a larger sample is needed.

Negative media coverage was related to the highest levels of stress in this sample of police officers, and the correlation to compassion fatigue was second in strength. A study in the United Kingdom by Jackson, Bradford, Stanko, and Hohl (2013) found that 80% of the information the general public received about the police was from mass media coverage. Crimes

that received media attention were serious—assault, murder, missing persons, and property crimes (Jackson et al., 2013). In the United States, Holley and Zezima (2016) pointed out that police officers are frequently singled out as unruly, aggressive, and racist in the media despite the severity of the criminal behaviors of the suspects. If media reports are biased, public opinions of law enforcement officers may become increasingly negative. Research related to the influence of media on community relations may prove invaluable in addressing cultural tensions.

### **Limitations**

Limitations to this study exist. As previously mentioned, some law enforcement agencies did not choose to participate in the study. Reasons for not partnering with the researcher included concerns about confidentiality, fear that law enforcement officers would be portrayed in a negative manner, and time constraints. The actual population from which the sample was derived is not known; as a result, the survey's response rate is unknown. The sample size was small, which limited the researcher's ability to disaggregate the data.

Officers may not have answered the inventory honestly due to fear of work repercussions despite the efforts of the researcher to ensure confidentiality. The researcher can only assume that the officers in this sample responded truthfully to the items.

The research sample may not accurately represent the current demographics of law enforcement nationwide. Finally, correlational research does not imply causality and should not be interpreted in that manner.

### **Implications for Professional Practice and Future Research**

Limited studies have been conducted to determine levels of compassion fatigue among law enforcement officers. Compassion fatigue symptoms include problems with focus and concentration, apathy, hopelessness, increased cynicism in the workplace, job absenteeism,

physical illness, difficulty separating work life and personal life, inability to make decisions, increased use of alcohol and drugs, and problems with intimacy in personal relationships (Grunfeld, 2007; Radey & Figley, 2007; Stamm, 2010). In severe cases of compassion fatigue, individuals may also experience depression, anxiety, nightmares, symptoms such as reliving traumatic events, and avoidance behaviors typically identified with posttraumatic stress disorder (Stamm, 2010). Given the potential severity of symptoms, law enforcement personnel and the general public must be proactive in identifying, remediating, and monitoring police officers' well-being and their ability to perform the job well, to react appropriately in times of crisis, and to maintain emotional stability in the workplace and home. The two instruments utilized in this study may assist in that process.

Citizens have voiced concerns about the use of force during arrests and potential racial discrimination by law enforcement officers. Further study is needed to assess whether unacceptable police responses are related to burnout and compassion fatigue rather than discriminatory behavior. More than 200 studies have been published to evaluate compassion fatigue among employees in a wide range of helping professions using the ProQOL (Stamm, 2010), but little research was found utilizing the ProQOL in police samples. This study found that of the 48 officers surveyed, 10% of law enforcement officers reported high levels of compassion fatigue and 21% of officers reported high levels of burnout. Positive, moderate correlations were found between felonious killing of police officers, cultural tension, and negative media coverage with compassion fatigue and burnout. To reduce officers' levels of burnout and compassion fatigue, supervisors should consider training police officers to effectively deal with the three areas of stressors found in this study, especially the stressor of negative media coverage.

In many cases, police officers cannot avoid negative media coverage. The researcher recommends that police departments conduct training sessions related to coping with both positive and negative publicity to possibly reduce stress related to media coverage and unwanted or unmerited publicity. To address cultural tension, police officers can become involved in community work, form positive relationships with residents, and establish connections that increase trust and police support. If cultural tension is reduced, perhaps violence towards law enforcement officers will also decline.

Police officers face a number of challenges in the work environment. Shift work, overwhelming caseloads, continuous responses to traumatic situations, and organizational conflict have been identified as stressors in police work (Grosch & Sauter, 2005; Hunsaker, Chen, Maughan & Heaston, 2015; Tuckey, Chrisopoulos, & Dollard, 2012; Wang, Zheng, Hu, & Zheng, 2014). Evans, Pistrang, & Billings (2013) found that police officers felt pressure to maintain a certain level of stoicism rather than discuss stress; however, they felt a sense of relief after discussing work-related trauma; the implications are clear: the symptoms of stress should be addressed in the work environment prior to an officer's need for professional treatment.

This researcher advises police officers and supervisors to watch for symptoms of employee stress and to encourage personnel to seek professional help before reaching critical levels of stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue. To prevent reluctance to discuss work-related stress, police departments should encourage officers to discuss stress and traumatic incidents in confidential and supportive environments. Psychoeducational programs that focus on methods of stress reduction and self-care can be incorporated in training procedures. Finally, law enforcement agencies should consider implementing internal departmental treatment capabilities,

such as hiring social workers and mental health counselors to help officers address stressors and psychological challenges in the work environment if those measures are not already available.

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## Appendix A

### PROFESSIONAL QUALITY OF LIFE SCALE (PROQOL 5)

When you [help] people you have direct contact with their lives. As you may have found, your compassion for those you [help] can affect you in positive and negative ways. Below are some questions about your experiences, both positive and negative, as a [helper]. Consider each of the following questions about you and your current work situation. Select the number that honestly reflects how frequently you experienced these things in the last 30 days.

1=Never      2=Rarely      3=Sometimes      4=Often      5=Very Often

1. I am happy.
2. I am preoccupied with more than one person I [help].
3. I get satisfaction from being able to [help] people.
4. I feel connected to others.
5. I jump or am startled by unexpected sounds.
6. I feel invigorated after working with those I [help].
7. I find it difficult to separate my personal life from my life as a [helper].
8. I am not as productive at work because I am losing sleep over traumatic experiences of a person I [help].
9. I think that I might have been affected by the traumatic stress of those I [help].
10. I feel trapped by my job as a [helper].
11. Because of my [helping], I have felt "on edge" about various things.
12. I like my work as a [helper].
13. I feel depressed because of the traumatic experiences of the people I [help].
14. I feel as though I am experiencing the trauma of someone I have [helped].
15. I have beliefs that sustain me.
16. I am pleased with how I am able to keep up with [helping] techniques and protocols.
17. I am the person I always wanted to be.
18. My work makes me feel satisfied.
19. I feel worn out because of my work as a [helper].
20. I have happy thoughts and feelings about those I [help] and how I could help them.
21. I feel overwhelmed because my case [work] load seems endless.
22. I believe I can make a difference through my work.
23. I avoid certain activities or situations because they remind me of frightening experiences of the people I [help].
24. I am proud of what I can do to [help].
25. As a result of my [helping], I have intrusive, frightening thoughts.
26. I feel "bogged down" by the system.
27. I have thoughts that I am a "success" as a [helper].
28. I can't recall important parts of my work with trauma victims.
29. I am a very caring person.
30. I am happy that I chose to do this work.

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## **Appendix B**

### Societal Stress Survey

1=Never      2=Rarely      3=Sometimes      4=Often      5=Very Often

1. I have witnessed or learned about the killing of a colleague.
2. I find myself thinking frequently about the death of a colleague(s).
3. I do what I can to avoid thinking about dangerous things that could happen to me in the line of duty.
4. I experience strong emotions of worry or sadness when I learn about the killing of a colleague.
5. I find myself having difficulty sleeping, concentrating, or regulating my emotions when I think about the dangers of my job.
6. I have experienced or learned about community disagreement with the way law enforcement performs their job duties.
7. I have frequent or distressful thoughts about lack of community support.
8. When I meet new people, I am reluctant to tell them what I do for a living.
9. I often feel detached from my responsibilities due to the way my community or family members feel about my work.
10. I sometimes feel irritable or sad due to the community's opinion of my job.
11. The media does not accurately describe events about police work.
12. When I read or see a negative story about police officers in the news or on social media sites, I have trouble letting it go.
13. I try to avoid having my work-related activities published in the newspaper, on television news, or on social media sites.
14. I am bothered by the way police officers are portrayed in the newspaper, on television, or on social media sites.
15. I get angry or defensive when I learn of negative media coverage of police officers.

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