

# **Organizational Leadership's Responsibility to Better Understand the Occupational Stressors Effecting Crime Scene Investigators**

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*Organizational leadership in law enforcement has an ethical responsibility to understand the emotional needs of law enforcement personnel. This includes those highly trained professionals referred to as crime scene investigators. These professionals are tasked with working in horrific environments, conducting investigations into some of the most heinous crimes. The impact to the crime scene investigator is both physically and mentally taxing. Leadership must produce highly trained and proficient crime scene professionals best suited to serve the community's needs. To achieve this, organizational leadership must recognize the occupational stressors and coping mechanisms that impact these professionals.*

*Keywords: leadership, resiliency, organizational leadership, occupational stressors, coping mechanisms*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Crime scene professionals are critical to scene investigations and gathering necessary forensic evidence to effectively prosecute criminals and obtain some form of justice for those who can no longer speak for themselves. These professionals are required to work in less-than-ideal environments for long periods of time involving the most serious cases of homicide, sexual assaults, suspicious deaths, and police-involved shootings. The crime scene professional's contextual ability to manage and cope with occupational stressors is vital to one's ability to be resilient (Rosansky et al., 2019). Law enforcement is one of the most strenuous professions with potential for repeated exposure to occupational stressors which require mitigating coping strategies (Craven et al., 2022). Manifestation of unacknowledged or untreated occupational stress can lead to negative behaviors without proper organizational support and mechanisms in place to provide resiliency options and coping strategies (Craven et al., 2022).

### **Organizational Leadership**

Organizational leadership must make efforts to reduce negative stigmas associated with reporting a mental health crisis and produce a culture that supports the engagement of team members to manage occupational stress (Keltly & Gordon, 2015; Sollie et al., 2017). There are over 18,000 law enforcement agencies in the United States and only 3-5% had suicide prevention programs (Heyman et al., 2018). Senior chain of command in law enforcement needs to be supportive and directly vested in the mitigation of occupational stress, providing coping mechanisms, and creating a workplace climate conducive and receptive for open communication between team members and chain of command (Keltly & Gordon, 2015; Sollie et al., 2017).

Leadership must recognize the occupational stressors associated with crime scene investigation work along with a cognitive understanding that resilience may be needed when practitioners are exposed to the most traumatic of crime scenes. Existing research suggests a connection between traumatic events to the degree of exposure-related stressors (Rosansky et al., 2019). Additionally, law enforcement organizational command must acknowledge the most common stressors, including the law enforcement organization, lack of organizational support, and the inherent risks associated with the profession (Violanti et al., 2016).

This article will focus on the specific occupational stressors and coping mechanisms of crime scene professionals as they relate to the day-to-day work and the organizational structure. It is important to note the law enforcement organizations may contribute to experienced occupational stressors. Sollie et al. (2017) noted organizational contributing factors to occupational stress as lack of training, internal agency-related conflicts, and even bureaucratic policies and administrative procedures. Success or failure in organizational resiliency is linked directly to occupational wellness programs and equally important to the law enforcement agencies' best practices (Denk-Florea et al., 2020).

### **Police Culture**

The law enforcement community is pervaded with a police culture unsurpassed by any other profession based on a shared willingness to take on elevated levels of personal risk for oneself and others for the community served (Wiechmann, 2018). The profession requires police officers to display moral and physical courage, and if perceived as unable to control emotions, may be seen as feeble and undependable. This cultural stigmatization is a primary reason police officers are reluctant to report mental health issues or seek assistance for occupational stressors (Bell & Eski, 2015; Spence & Drake, 2021).

Police personnel often view the world through the “us versus them” lens, fostering trust-only relationships with fellow law enforcement officers (Steinkopf et al., 2015, p.349). This police culture is based on a shared bond and trust relationship between law enforcement personnel. Police culture has fermented the notion of limited trust for those outside the inner law enforcement circle (Steinkopf et al., 2015).

### *Negative Stigma*

A negative label or stigma associated with weakness can result in personal isolation making life within the organization more isolating, lowering self-esteem and minimizing positive encounters within the workplace (Bell & Eski, 2015). This may be an inhibiting factor preventing those in need for seeking resiliency options or mental health assistance. In many circumstances, police culture has discouraged the idea of a safe place to report within the law enforcement agency based on the notion that police values are soaked in a tradition of bravery, self-control, and courage (Bell & Eski, 2015; Newell et al., 2022). Existing research supports the notion that supporting mental health programs or pursuing mental health assistance can be deemed career-threatening (Bell & Eski, 2015; Carlson-Johnson et al., 2020; Perez-Floriano & Gonzalez, 2019; Yasuhara et al., 2019).

### **Crime Scene Professional**

The initial crime scene is considered the most essential portion of the criminal investigation and where pertinent evidence is located to connect the victim to the suspect and scene providing the necessary physical evidence for a conviction in a court of law (Fisher & Fisher, 2022; Kelty et al., 2011). In fact, jurors expect today to see and hear testimony based on forensic-related evidence collected at the scene from those tasked in crime scene investigations (Fisher & Fisher, 2022). The nature of crime scene investigation work exposes those highly trained professionals to traumatic events and critical incidents more often than other police personnel. Their duration and proximity to each crime scene may have a cumulative impact based on repeated traumatic exposure over a career (Craven et al., 2022; Leone & Keel, 2016; Sollie et al., 2017).

### *Sworn and Non-Sworn Crime Scene Personnel*

Crime scene professionals may be sworn law enforcement personnel or non-law enforcement personnel often called forensic technicians or crime scene technicians (Adderley et al., 2012; Leone & Keel, 2016;

McKay-Davis et al., 2020). This is based on the state and agency hiring the crime scene professional and the employment classification. Civilian crime scene professionals have reported a higher pervasiveness of mental health disorders than sworn law enforcement professionals (Martin et al., 2021). All law enforcement professionals suffer from higher risks associated with stress and health issues, cancer, heart disease, addictions, and divorce, than the general civilian public (Roach et al., 2017; Russell, 2014).

### *Crime Scene Personnel Responsibilities*

Crime scene professionals are specifically trained to identify, photograph, collect, document, preserve, and transport potential evidence from the scene to the police agency for processing or to a forensic laboratory for examination (Fisher & Fisher, 2022; McKay-Davis et al., 2020; Mrevlje, 2016; Salinas & Webb, 2018). These professionals will be consumed in crime scene work surrounding latent fingerprints, biological evidence, trace evidence, ballistics, blood spatter, and a variety of other delicate forensic-related evidence (Fisher & Fisher, 2022; Mrevlje, 2016). Forensic evidence is important to reference as insufficiently conducted or mishandled crime scenes may result in forensic-related evidence having little or no merit in the courtroom. This may result in a miscarriage of justice with no conviction of the guilty or the wrongful imprisonment of the innocent (Kelty et al., 2023; Kelty & Gordon, 2015).

### *Lay and Expert Testimony*

Crime scene professionals are obligated to testify in criminal court as a lay and sometimes expert witness. In most cases, crime scene professionals testify as lay or fact witnesses offering sworn testimony simply to what is written within a technical crime scene report. However expert testimony is sometimes necessary when the court is recognizing the crime scene professional as having specialized knowledge and training, which affords the witness, if approved by the judicial authority, the rare opportunity to offer opinion or expert testimony to the jury (Fisher & Fisher, 2022). This provides a unique potential for occupational stress to the crime scene investigator as testimony may be peppered with questions regarding validity, error rates, peer review, and personal qualifications within our adversarial court system (Almazrouei et al., 2020). The expert witness is also tasked with educating the jury based on specialized knowledge within the forensic field, which can be weighed by the jury when offering a trial verdict (Flick et al., 2022).

## **Occupational Stress**

There is no debate that crime scene professionals are exposed to critical incidents and high-stress environments (Leone & Keel, 2016; Sheard et al., 2019). Some crime scene professionals are more successful than others in dealing with occupational stressors and in coping with traumatic incidents, while others may carry psychological scars potentially leading to unrelenting occupational stress, burnout, post-traumatic stress disorder, and even suicide (Cartwright & Roach, 2022; Kelty & Gordon, 2015). In fact, one-fifth of law enforcement suffer from occupational stressors (Kelty & Gordon, 2015).

Occupational stress and burnout will likely result in an unhappy and unproductive employee impacting the organization with increased absenteeism, substance abuse, elevated work-related mishaps, and even early retirement (Jeanguenat & Dror, 2018; Kelty & Gordon, 2015). Occupational stressors have also been noted to impact negatively the immune system, high blood pressure, an elevated threat of heart attacks, strokes, and anxiety (Almazrouei et al., 2020; Jeanguenat & Dror, 2018; Leone & Keel, 2016; McKay-Davis et al., 2020). Existing research has exploited the fact that crime scene professionals are chronically suffering from large case volume, mandatory assignments and deadlines, long working hours, technology distractions, and low salaries (Jeanguenat & Dror, 2018; Sheard et al., 2019; Violanti et al., 2016).

### *Origin of Occupational Stress*

Existing research suggests that crime scene professional occupational stressors originate from four distinct areas: stress internal to the organization, stress external to the organization, stress resulting from the occupation, and personal stress from outside sources. It is imperative to note that imported stress from one's personal life can compound and inflame occupational stress. This means that trauma cannot be

counted or articulated based on the number of exposures to the crime scene professional (Leone & Keel, 2016; Salinas & Webb, 2018).

### *Resiliency*

Resiliency is the ability to manage and adapt to occupational stress as encountered during work-related activities (Rosansky et al., 2019). Utilizing organizational-based resiliency options and identifying appropriate coping mechanisms for implementation will ultimately result in better workforce performance and likely improve both work and personal relationships (Mrevlje, 2016). For organizational leadership to best understand how to use resiliency resources and identify which resiliency options are most appropriate, there must be a better understanding of those critical incidents that may need attention and what the needs are from crime scene investigators. This should include those stressors originating from within the organization and fostered knowingly or unknowingly by leadership (Carleton et al., 2019). Additionally, leadership must acknowledge and recognize that team members ethnicity, social status, religious orientation, and current economic position can also impact an individual's exposure to critical incidents (Kula, 2017).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative research study was conducted using a descriptive phenomenological approach using semi-structured face-to-face personal interviews. This qualitative phenomenological design aimed to provide insight into the lived experiences of crime scene professionals (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Smith et al., 2022). The personal interviews were meticulously transcribed for accuracy and to minimize implicit bias and subjectivity before coding and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Sutton & Austin, 2015). This research study consisted of 16 voluntary participants currently employed as crime scene investigators in the State of New Jersey at the county or state level. No local law enforcement agencies were included in this qualitative phenomenological research study.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

***RQ1:** What occupational stressors and coping mechanisms impact crime scene practitioners in New Jersey?*

***RQ2:** How do New Jersey Law enforcement agencies foster an environment to help crime scene investigators cope with work-related occupational stressors?*

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

This study explored the occupational stressors and coping mechanisms that impact crime scene investigators in New Jersey, which revealed four major themes identified, highlighted in Table 1 (Winter, 2024). This study explored how New Jersey law enforcement agencies foster an environment to help crime scene investigators cope with work-related occupational stressors, which revealed one major theme, highlighted in Table 2 (Winter, 2024). In addition, a supplementary finding was noted regarding an inquiry made to each participant during the semi-structured face-to-face interview on whether the participant's emotional response to crime scenes has changed during their time as a crime scene professional. The results are explained and highlighted in Figure 1 and Figure 2 (Winter, 2024).

***RQ1:** What occupational stressors and coping mechanisms impact Crime scene practitioners in New Jersey?*

**TABLE 1  
MAJOR THEMES**

<b>Themes &amp; Codes</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<p><b>1. Coping Mechanisms Used to Help Mitigate Occupational Stressors</b></p> <p><i>(Codes: Faith, God, Exercise, Vacations, Family Time, Spouse, Alcohol, Dark Humor, Gardening, Time Alone, Music, Outdoor Activities, Cigars, Carpentry, Hunting/Fishing)</i></p>	16	100
<p><b>2. Occupational Stressors Resulting from Crime Scene Investigation Work Coupled with Demands from the Law Enforcement Agency</b></p> <p><i>(Codes: Kid Cases, Baby Deaths, Job Demands, Poor Management, Salary, No Path to Promotion, On-Call Demands, No Family Time, Budget Constraints, Courtroom Testimony, Lack of Trust, Unreasonable Deadlines, Poor Leadership, Overworked, Death Innocent Victims, Death of Co-Workers, Being Perfectionist)</i></p>	16	100
<p><b>3. Impact of Workplace Occupational Stress on Family</b></p> <p><i>(Codes: Yelling, Annoyed, Short Temper, Keep to Myself, Bring Anxiety and Stress Home, No Family Time, Arguments Spouse, Missing Family Activities, Strained Relationship with Spouse, Divorce)</i></p>	12	75
<p><b>4. Personal Impact of Workplace Occupational Stressors</b></p> <p><i>(Codes: More Detached, Trust Only Inner Circle, Calling Out Sick, Numb to the Work, Lack Trust Others, Burnout, Jaded, Shut Down, More Cautious, Lack of Sleep, Avoid Certain Foods)</i></p>	10	62.50

Note: N = 16

This research question explored the occupational stressors and coping mechanisms which impact crime scene investigators in the State of New Jersey. Sheard et al. (2019) suggests a vulnerability among law enforcement when exposed to critical incidents which may lead to issues of mental health. Existing research has shown an unwillingness or inability of law enforcement personnel to separate work from personal life leading to coping strategies involving addictions (Carlson-Johnson et al., 2020). In addition, the burden carried by law enforcement personnel has been shown to impact their families based on their burnout, work schedules, hypervigilance, and occupational stressors resulting in less quality time with family (Pooley & Turns, 2021; Stogner et al., 2020). All participants in the study offered examples of coping mechanisms used to mitigate occupational stress. Most of the responses centered on spending time with immediate family and associated coping mechanisms away from the work environment, as indicated in Table 1 (Winter, 2024).

The participants overwhelmingly expressed occupational stressors surrounding investigations into child-related deaths. This notion is confirmed in existing research, which found cases involving the victimization of children emotionally taxing (Andersen et al., 2018). In addition, many participants noted

poor leadership and management as a predominant origin of occupational stress fostered from unnecessary or unrealistic demands and deadlines from the organization, budget constraints, and a lack of promotional opportunities based on their specialized training as a crime scene investigator. Many participants expressed frustration, feeling detached, jaded and overly cautious based on their experiences within the law enforcement organization. Some expressed burnout and a lack of trust for those outside their crime scene unit, which was more extreme than the lack of trust inherently expressed for those outside law enforcement based on years of police culture (Winter, 2024).

Noteworthy during this portion of the face-to-face interview was a significant emotional response provoked from 20% of the participants when the interview questions and conversation moved towards both the impact of occupational stressors on family and when the participants discussed child-related and infant deaths. This area of the interview provoked a surprising emotional reaction where participants began to cry and become visibly shaken and unsettled (Winter, 2024).

**RQ2:** *How do New Jersey Law enforcement agencies foster an environment to help crime scene investigators cope with work-related occupational stressors?*

**TABLE 2**  
**MAJOR THEMES**

	Themes	Frequency	Percent
1.	No Substantive Organizational Relief for Workplace Occupational Stressors	9	56.25
	<i>(Codes: Nothing Proactive, Just Do Job, We're Like on Our Own Island Here, Perceived as Garbage Collectors, Rushing and Pressuring Us, No Involvement with Senior Chain of Command, No Idea What Crime Scene Does, No Planning Organization, No Help Unless You Ask, No Promotion Opportunities, Agency Lacks Training and Leadership)</i>		

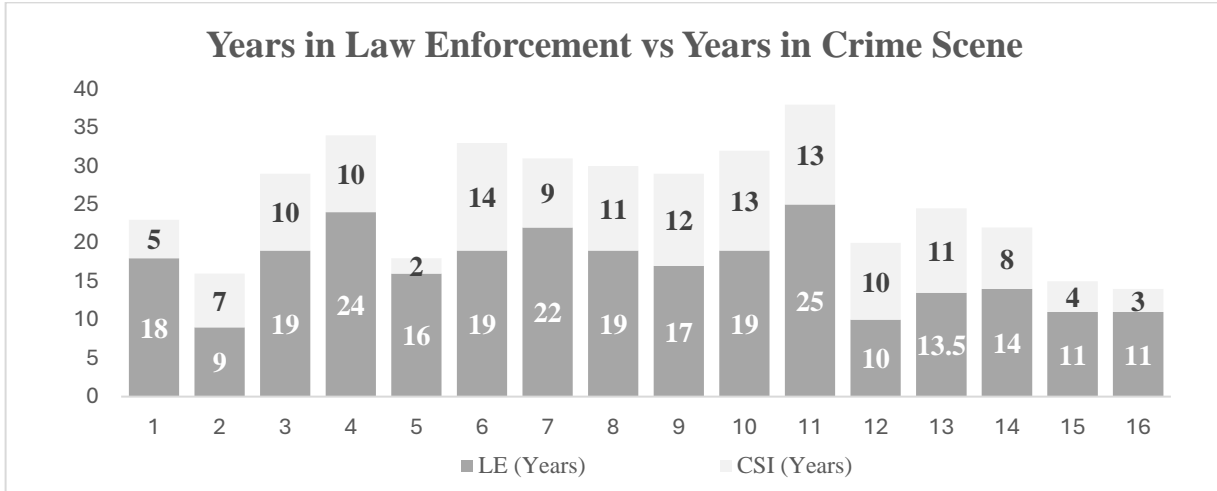
*Note: N = 16*

This research question was directed to enquire whether these study participants perceived that senior leadership, within their organization, fostered an environment conducive to coping with work-related occupational stressors. Several fundamental issues resonated to include command leadership's ability to recognize occupational stressors, note those occupational stressors which may result from organizational behavior, and that there may be a lack of trust within the organizational structure between leader and follower (Carlson-Johnson et al., 2020; Kula, 2017). Organizational command must recognize that only through self-reflection and action can organizational culture improve work conditions and employee attitudes (Maran et al., 2022; Russell, 2014).

Several participants suggested that leadership is not interested in personnel in the sense they wish to know and understand the personal occupational stressors effecting crime scene practitioners. While resiliency options may be mandated or offered within the organization, it is the action of frontline and senior leadership's action that creates conditions to foster an environment of open dialogue, communication, and trust between leader and follower (Winter, 2024). Stinchcomb (2004) points out that organizational leadership often treats stressors as an "individual disorder" rather than accepting that some of those stressors are the result of "organizational dysfunction" (p.268).

**SUPPLEMENTAL FINDING**

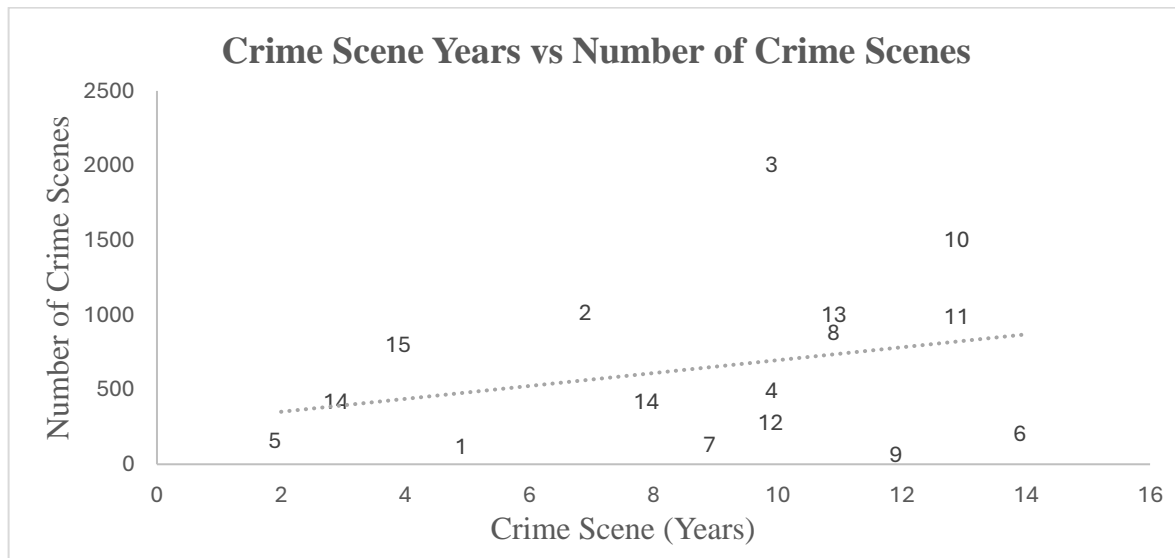
**FIGURE 1  
BAR CHART ILLUSTRATION COMPARING YEARS IN LAW ENFORCEMENT  
VS. YEARS IN CRIME SCENE**



Note: N = 16

The participants in this research study were 93.75% male versus 6.25% female with an average of 16.66 years in law enforcement and 8.88 years assigned to a crime scene unit. The study consisted of 16 participants with 13 noting their emotional response to crime scenes has changed (Winter, 2024).

**FIGURE 2  
CHART ILLUSTRATION COMPARING YEARS IN CRIME SCENE  
VS. NUMBER OF CRIME SCENES**



Note: N = 16

The study results demonstrated no significant change based on participant time assigned to a crime scene unit or mean number of crime scenes investigated and/or an emotional change over time. Emotional

change or impact of occupational stressors appeared independent for each practitioner and there is no apparent connection between occupational stress and time in service or the number of crime scenes investigated. The ability to cope with occupational stress and implement coping mechanisms was largely an individual journey even though there was a shared commonality relationship regarding the specific types of occupational stress impacting crime scene investigators and the coping mechanisms employed to mitigate stress (Winter, 2024).

## CONCLUSION

Culture within law enforcement is bound by loyalty and camaraderie with support for each other during the most horrific life events (Wiechman, 2018). The secret ingredient to support is a culture of trust among each other (Bell & Eski, 2015). The brotherhood of policing is mired within a shadow of stigmatism which culturally exists, prohibiting many from seeking the necessary mental health assistance for fear of isolation among peers (Bell & Eski, 2015; Spence & Drake, 2021; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2023).

Crime scene practitioners are the closest to the crime scene, with repeated exposure to traumatic events and critical incidents throughout a career at the crime scene (Craven et al., 2022; Leone & Keel, 2016; Sollie et al., 2017). It is clear occupational stress will continue to exist in this demanding profession and effective mitigation techniques need to be in place to protect those who serve the public. Largely participants in the study felt comfortable in their relationship with frontline supervisors trained as crime scene investigators based on the common notion that there would be an understanding of the stressors and demands of the occupation if the leader was approachable and trustworthy (Winter, 2024).

Organizational leaders making appropriate efforts to build functional resiliency programs should be commended, which is certainly occurring in the State of New Jersey. Organizational leaders must demonstrate a commitment to leadership techniques and accept responsibility for those occupational stressors that originate from organizational behaviors or policies. This corrective action will better the lives of followers (Stinchcomb, 2004).

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