

The Role of Warrior Mentality on Law Enforcement Officers' Perceptions of Mental Health

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Abstract

Warrior mentality is the foundational focus of police academy training and is a crucial mindset not only for the safety of each Law Enforcement Officer (LEO) but also for maintaining a successful police force. However, warrior mentality may also provide explanations for LEO deterrence to receiving mental health services. Discovering the characteristics of warrior mentality and its effects on well-being will allow counselors to better understand this population and will contribute to the mental health services provided to police officers.

A review and synthesis of the current literature are provided to include a framework of how warrior mentality is defined and a review of policing organizations' complex nature and its effects on officers' mental health. Lastly, current warrior mentality research is examined to show a gap in research relating to its relationship to mental health perceptions, along with implications for counselors to better serve this population.

Organizational Structure

Warrior mentality is emphasized through organizational socialization which begins from the very beginning of a police recruit's training where they are taught the values and norms of the organization (Simon, 2021).

Most attitudes and norms have developed over time alongside societal cultural changes to cope with the inherent risks of police work, specifically emphasizing officer safety (Paoline, Myers & Worden, 2000).

Simon (2021) discussed several important attitudes of police officers including a heightened sense of suspicion and a perception of policing as warfare.

Paoline, Myers & Worden (2006) described a *we-versus-they* attitude that included themes of social isolation due to enforcing authority, group loyalty, and suspiciousness.

Warrior Mentality: Defined

Stoughton (2014) defines the Warrior Mindset as "the mental tenacity and attitude that officers, like soldiers, are taught to adopt in the face of a life-threatening struggle" (p. 226). Personality characteristics that seem to be markers of successful entry-level police officers include a heightened sense of awareness, emotional control, self-discipline, wariness, guardedness, and extraversion traits such as social assertiveness and a need for stimulation (Detrick & Chibnall, 2006). These also happen to be the characteristics that describe warrior mentality (Stoughton, 2014; Fox et al., 2012; Bullock & Garland, 2018; Gilmartin & Artwohl, 2002).

Impact of Duties on Mental Health

Prevalence- Jetelina et al. (2020) found that 12% of officers reported a lifetime diagnosis of a mental illness, and 26% were screened positive for depression, anxiety, PTSD, and suicidal factors.

Performance- Excessive job assignments and general work overload place LEOs in a state of constant emotional and physical exhaustion (Roberts & Levenson, 2001).

Family Life- Factors such as an unconventional schedule, overtime work, and being on-call have a direct impact on a family (Miller, 2007).

Community- Bullock and Garland explain a "virtual social identity" in which the public has a perceived expectation that LEOs should possess characteristics such as courage, stoicism, resilience, and dependability under all circumstances (2018).

Public Perception- Our current political climate has shown a dramatic shift in the public's perception and treatment of LEOs in recent years, commonly recognized as the post-Ferguson era (Capellan et al., 2020).

Values/Spirituality- Boesser-Koschmann recounts the healing process of police officers who experience the death of a fellow officer. She describes the complex process of forgiveness and servant leadership that must develop to continue in the line of duty (Boesser-Koschmann, 2012).



Gaps in Existing Literature

While warrior mentality is a thoroughly researched phenomenon, much of the current research is focused on two central external concerns.

Police Brutality

Warrior mentality is a subcategory within the militarization of policing, by concentrating on external factors such as community relations, public perspectives of police (Simckes et al., 2019), and violent and/or confrontational interactions among officers and citizens (Li et al., 2021).

Guardian vs. Warrior Training

The Task Force on 21st Century Policing during the Obama administration took an initiative to shift from a warrior mentality to a guardian mindset in order to make effective changes within agencies and public relationships (Schermer, 2015). Li and colleagues (2021) explored the impact of using a guardian training model in police academies versus a militaristic training model. Their research provided insight into the relationship between warrior mentality and policing outcomes.

Critical Race Theory

Warrior mentality in law enforcement has been researched through a critical race theoretical lens and is focused on police brutality and reform. The current Black Lives Matter movement has focused heavily on this phenomenon. However, research fails to address the possible impact of public perception on competent LEOs' well-being.

Negative public perception could adversely affect an officer's work performance and ability to respond effectively, exacerbating the very problems that activists aim to address. Providing more effective mental health and wellness care to LEOs could help mitigate police brutality and militaristic behaviors.

Clinical Implications

Mental health providers can provide efficient and successful treatment to police officers if they more clearly understand the intricacies of warrior mentality. With a well-defined knowledge of warrior mentality and how this mindset affects police officers' lives, providers may be able to incorporate more effective treatment modalities or alternative therapies to cater to this population.

Lastly, this comprehension could help provide a voice to the community of police officers' experiences, and in turn, strengthen public relations and support.

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