

# Toxic Police Cultures and Community Harm: Organizational Dysfunction and Public Trust

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**Abstract:** Organizational culture—the shared values, norms, and behavioral expectations within law enforcement agencies—strongly shapes officer well-being and public interactions. Toxic elements of police culture are linked to officer burnout, cynicism, moral disengagement, and spillover effects that strain community relations. Drawing on scholarship from criminal justice, organizational psychology, and public health, this literature review examines how dysfunctional agency cultures undermine procedural justice, erode public trust, and contribute to excessive use of force and racial disparities in policing. Key theoretical lenses include organizational justice theory, social identity theory, moral disengagement theory, systems theory, and the spillover model. The review highlights the mental health burdens officers face, the stigma that discourages help-seeking, and the resulting challenges in responding to community members in crisis, particularly those experiencing mental illness. Police legitimacy rests less on crime-control outcomes and more on public perceptions of fairness, transparency, and respect. As trust declines, communities become less willing to cooperate, deepening divides. Addressing these issues requires internal cultural reform alongside national investments in mental health services, crisis intervention, housing, and social support, especially in marginalized communities, to reduce reliance on law enforcement and foster a more effective, humane public safety ecosystem.

**Keywords:** Toxic Police Culture, Police Legitimacy, Procedural Justice, Officer Burnout, Community Trust, Organizational Justice, Law Enforcement, and Community.

## INTRODUCTION

Scholarly attention to police organizational culture intensified in the 1970s amid racial tensions, protests, and high-profile incidents of brutality. Decades of research have documented how departmental subcultures—characterized by strong in-group loyalty, distrust of outsiders, and informal norms—shape officer behavior, wellness, and community relations (Westley, 1970; Paoline, 2003; Hassell & Brandl, 2018). While much early training and policy focused on technical skills and rules, deeper cultural factors such as competitiveness, loyalty pressures, and resistance to oversight often remain unaddressed, contributing to officer disengagement and strained public interactions (Ang *et al.*, 2024).

Despite extensive study of individual stressors in policing, relatively little research has systematically examined how internal organizational dynamics relate to broader community-level outcomes such as fear, cooperation, and perceived legitimacy. This review synthesizes literature from criminal justice, organizational behavior, and public health to examine how toxic cultural norms within agencies, through the lens of organizational justice theory, social identity theory, moral disengagement theory, systems theory, and the Spillover-Crossover Model (**SCM**) model, can

harm officers and spill over to affect the communities they serve. It also identifies research gaps, particularly the need for longitudinal studies using validated measures of toxic culture to examine the links between officers' experiences and public perceptions (Tuttle *et al.*, 2018)

Toxic police culture refers to normalized aggression, acceptable misconduct, and loyalty over accountability through shared beliefs and behaviors within law enforcement. The warrior mindset refers to values and beliefs that train officers to view the community as dangerous and oppositional. This mindset promotes dominance and overarching power dynamics over Community Trust and de-escalation (Silvestri & Tong, 2020). Although this mindset is perceived as heightening officer safety in high-risk situations, it also increases unjustified use of force and power in uncertain situations.

Police culture is not monolithic or static; rather, it evolves in response to societal shifts, legislation, and technological advancements. Nevertheless, persistent features such as an “us versus them” orientation and skepticism toward external oversight continue to impede accountability, officer wellness, and organizational reform (Silvestri & Tong, 2020). According to Statista, as of 2024, the United States employed approximately 737,000 full-time law enforcement officers (Statista, 2026). Figure 1 illustrates the scale of the policing

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## Full-time Police Officers in the U.S.

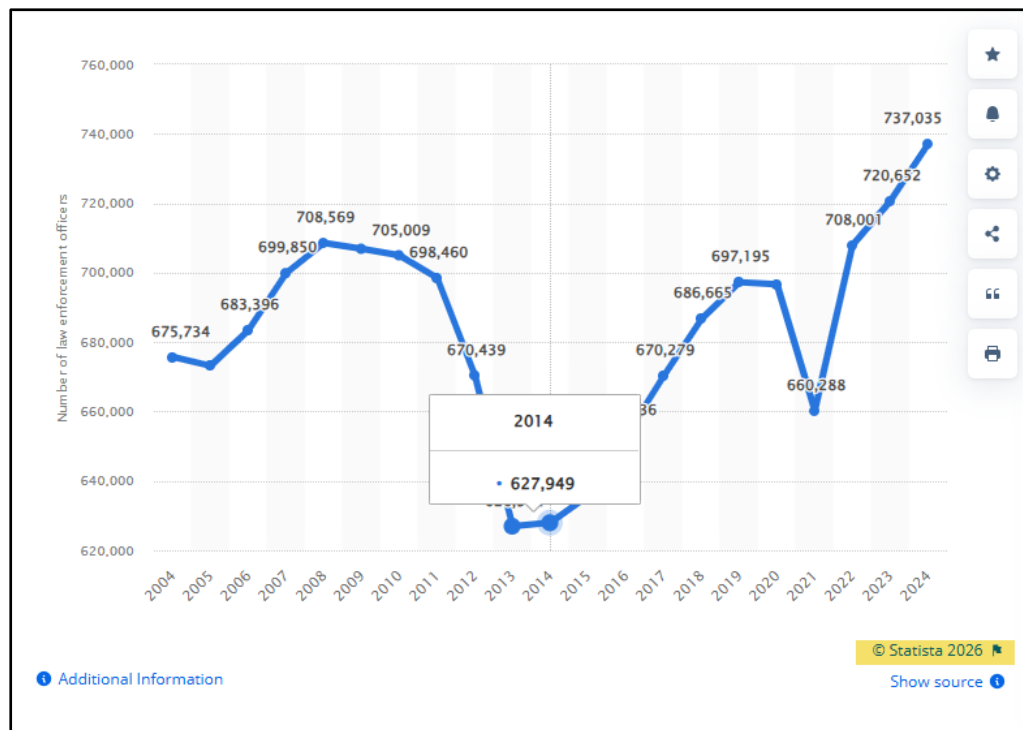


Figure 1: (Statista, 2026).

profession and the broad organizational implications associated with police culture nationwide.

Although research has examined organizational stressors in law enforcement, few studies have examined pathways from officers' mental health to community-level outcomes. Empirical evidence suggests a clear association between behavior and structure. According to Purba and Demou (2019), chronic burnout trauma exposure and stress lead to increased emotional exhaustion and heightened use of force, leading to a decrease in procedural fairness in officer-civilian interactions. Moreover, officers who experience elevated levels of stress and burnout are more likely to act unethically, increasing biased decision-making, resulting in unjust traffic stops, searches, and arrests (Burke, 2020).

### DISCLOSURES

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. This manuscript does not represent the views of any funding body or the authors' institutions. No external support was received for this work. The content reflects the authors' original analysis and synthesis of the literature. Grammarly was used solely for grammar and APA-style

checks; the ideas, arguments, and scholarly voice are the authors' own.

### FOUNDATIONAL THEORIES

Understanding toxic police culture and its consequences requires an interdisciplinary lens that connects organizational structures to individual decision-making and community outcomes.

Organizational justice theory posits that employees' perceptions of fairness in procedures, outcomes, and interpersonal treatment shape their attitudes and behaviors (Colquitt *et al.*, 2013). In policing, when officers perceive a lack of support, recognition, or equitable treatment within their agency, resentment can build, fostering cynicism and reducing commitment to ethical standards. These internal dynamics often influence how officers engage with the public.

Social identity theory explains how strong identification with the police "in-group" can create psychological distance from outsiders (Ellemers, 2023). Officers may internalize norms that equate vulnerability with weakness, discouraging help-seeking for stress or mental health issues. The "blue wall of silence"

exemplifies this dynamic: loyalty and mutual reliance for safety make reporting misconduct risky, as it threatens group cohesion (Alyahya & Bleakley, 2025). Over time, the pressure to appear tough can exacerbate burnout and isolation, while reinforcing an “us versus them” worldview that colors interactions with civilians—particularly those from minority communities.

Moral disengagement theory, rooted in Bandura’s social cognitive framework, describes the psychological mechanisms that allow individuals to violate personal ethical standards without self-condemnation (Bandura, 1999). In police contexts, officers may rationalize aggressive or biased actions by framing them as necessary for community protection, minimizing harm through comparisons with other agencies, displacing responsibility, or dehumanizing suspects. When such mechanisms become normalized, unethical behavior shifts from exception to cultural expectation.

Systems theory views organizations as interconnected systems where leadership, policies, training, peer norms, and external pressures influence one another (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Negative spillover occurs when internal stressors or toxic norms affect officers’ behavior in the field; external factors, such as community distrust or perceived danger, can, in turn, heighten internal stress. The stressor-detachment model further illustrates how poor recovery from job demands can impair judgment and emotional regulation during public encounters (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015).

## **SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW METHODOLOGY**

This literature review employed a systematic search strategy to identify relevant, high-quality peer-reviewed sources on police organizational culture, officer well-being, procedural justice, and community outcomes. Databases searched included PsycINFO, PubMed, Criminal Justice Abstracts, Google Scholar, and Web of Science (January 2000–April 2026). Keywords combined terms such as “police culture” OR “toxic police culture” OR “police organizational culture” with “burnout” OR “mental health” OR “procedural justice” OR “legitimacy” OR “use of force” OR “community trust.” Inclusion criteria comprised English-language empirical studies, systematic reviews, and theoretical works published in peer-reviewed journals or by reputable academic presses, whereas purely opinion-based or non-empirical media sources were excluded unless used for contextual framing. Core references have been provided.

Additional hand-searching of reference lists and key journals, including *Police Quarterly*, *Policing and Society*, and *Criminology*, was conducted. Approximately 150 sources were screened, yielding more than 60 core references. Consistent with systematic review and evidence synthesis guidance (Page *et al.*, 2021), analysis followed a thematic synthesis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Thomas & Harden, 2008), organizing findings around theoretical lenses, causal pathways, and recurring organizational themes while also attending to U.S.-centric limitations and calls for comparative international research. Quality was assessed informally by considering source type, citation impact, methodological transparency, and relevance to the study’s central themes.

## **UNIFIED CONCEPTUAL MODEL**

The theoretical perspectives discussed in this article suggest a single, hypothetical framework that links toxic police culture to officer- and community-level outcomes. Drawing on organizational justice theory, social identity theory, moral disengagement theory, and systems theory, the unified model conceptualizes police organizations as interdependent mechanisms in which internal values and external environments consistently interact.

At the organizational level, unethical norms influence officer behavior through mechanisms identified in social identity theory and moral disengagement theory. Workplace culture shapes how officers behave. When certain actions are not sanctioned or are quietly accepted, they can start to feel like the norm. Over time, officers may change their thinking to fit in with others. Wanting to belong and stay loyal to coworkers can become more important than following outside rules. Wanting to fit in and maintain good relations with coworkers can take priority over external rules or ethical expectations (Silver *et al.*, 2017). In such circumstances, officers experience identity reinforcement by detaching from external ethical values that reflect morals and fairness.

At the community level, this can be understood through systems theory. When officers feel threatened, it can affect their decision-making and lead to bias. This can be seen in how they interact with community members, often leading to less trust and less cooperation with law enforcement. In turn, this lack of cooperation can create more stress within police organizations, which can make negative workplace culture even worse.

This abstract model emphasizes that police culture is not just internal—it is part of a cycle in which officer well-being and community trust influence one another, shaping fairness and public safety.

### **DEFINING TOXIC POLICE CULTURE AND ITS IMPACTS**

Edgar Schein (2010) described organizational culture as patterns of shared assumptions that guide behavior. In policing, these assumptions shape discretion, leadership expectations, and peer interactions. Toxic culture emerges when informal norms tolerate or encourage deviance, retaliation against whistleblowers, and resistance to accountability (Skolnick, 2008; Hassell & Brandl, 2018).

Key manifestations include the code of silence, whereby officers hesitate to report misconduct due to fear of retaliation or career damage (Rothwell & Baldwin, 2007; Westmarland, 2005). Hyper-masculinity and a “warrior” mindset—emphasizing dominance and constant readiness for threat—can normalize aggression and discourage de-escalation (Stoughton, 2016; Paoline, 2003). Officers who challenge these norms may face informal sanctions such as undesirable assignments or social ostracism, further entrenching disengagement (Kutnjak Ivković, 2005; Brown & Treviño, 2006).

Leadership plays a pivotal role. Transformational leaders who model ethical behavior and psychological safety can mitigate toxicity, whereas those who prioritize statistics over accountability allow harmful norms to proliferate (Densten, 2003). Weak internal affairs processes and limited civilian oversight compound the problem, signaling that misconduct carries few consequences (Walker & Archbold, 2014). According to Dr. Lyle, cops will tell you that they need additional training, particularly in de-escalation techniques and psychology. Police leaders will tell you the same thing, with one caveat: police chiefs must balance the budget. In current times, there are no extras. Paul Hirschfield, professor of sociology at Rutgers, shares his thoughts on training cops:

Most national police colleges in Northern Europe provide about two years of top-notch education (which includes courses that everyone agrees police need, like psychology, law, communications, and cultural awareness) for free,” says Hirschfield. “Not surprisingly, they have no

trouble attracting upstanding recruits. *Can we train American police to turn away from violence?* (n.d.).

When officers approach encounters with suspicion or aggression, citizens perceive policing as adversarial rather than protective. Research consistently shows that procedural justice—fair, respectful, and transparent treatment—matters more for legitimacy than crime-control success (Tyler, 2004; Mazerolle *et al.*, 2013).

### **PUBLIC AUTHORITY AND RACIAL TENSIONS**

Police validity hinges on public beliefs that officers exercise authority fairly and morally (Lum & Koper, 2025). High-profile incidents involving excessive force, often amplified by media and social platforms, have intensified scrutiny and eroded trust, particularly in minority communities (Deuchar *et al.*, 2021). When cultural norms foster moral disengagement or burnout, officers may default to less patient, more forceful responses, reinforcing perceptions of bias.

Racial disparities persist in stops, searches, and use of force. Studies indicate Black and Latino drivers face higher search rates than White drivers despite lower contraband hit rates, suggesting bias influenced by cultural and stress-related factors (The Sentencing Project, 2023; Public Policy Institute of California, 2024). Chronic organizational stress and implicit biases, amplified by toxic norms that discourage emotional processing, contribute to these patterns (Purba & Demou, 2019; Burke, 2020).

### **REDUCED COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND COOPERATION**

When trust erodes, citizens become less willing to report crimes, serve as witnesses, or engage in collaborative problem-solving. This creates a feedback loop: unreported crime hampers effective policing, which is essential to core values (Tyler, 2006; Ang *et al.*, 2024). Jurors, influenced by high-profile cases and social media, increasingly demand corroborating evidence such as body-camera footage when police testify (Kassin *et al.*, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2023).

The “Ferguson Effect” debate highlights another risk: heightened scrutiny may lead some officers to withdraw from proactive enforcement, potentially increasing disorder in already strained neighborhoods (Puentes, 2015; Fields, 2019).

**COMMUNITY’S VIEW OF PUBLIC SERVANTS**

Similar to how police culture affects officers, the community can be impacted when the police culture is toxic. Sir Robert Peel’s 9 Principles of policing can further explain how the community will spill over when police have a bad culture. Sir Robert Peel once stated, “The police are the public, and the public are the police.” (The Nine Principles of Sir Robert Peel, n.d.). Peel’s first principle of policing states that the goal of policing is to prevent crime and assist the public in doing the same. Principle four tells us, “The measure of police efficiency is the extent to which the public co-operates with the police in voluntary observance of the law.” Studies show that less force yields a more compliant society. If the police culture encourages aggression and fighting with the public, why would the community want to help the police?

Historically, the United States, decoupling from the Vietnam era, found a place for its homecoming military veterans, and the warrior mentality came with it. The warrior ideology tells officers that everyone they encounter will harm them. When police officers treat every citizen as if they are shooting guns at them, civilians will feel as if they are at war with the police. Research supports that procedural justice policing has a greater impact on citizens’ feelings that police are legitimate than actual crime stats. Police officers having pat-downs on citizens and wearing full gear while questioning them seems like the police are at war with citizens. It feels like an occupying force whose mission is not protection but oppression.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, U.S. police agencies heavily recruited returning Vietnam veterans, drawn to their discipline, tactical readiness, and service ethos at a time when many departments faced staffing shortages. While the immediate “war fatigue” (legacy PTSD) and battle trauma were recognized to some degree, large-scale studies (e.g., National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study) later documented significant long-term PTSD prevalence—roughly 15–30% lifetime rates among theater veterans—with ongoing impacts on mental health, relationships, and decision-making decades later.

**MILITARY VETERAN TO POLICE OFFICER**

According to Rolle, K., the Center for Civilians in Conflict. (2021, January 13) and Weichselbaum, S., & Schwartzapfel, B. (2017, March 30), and today’s recruitment of military veterans (who make up about 19% of local/state police officers despite being only ~6–8% of the U.S. population) continues to offer clear operational advantages in high-stress environments, leadership, and technical skills. However, research and investigations also highlight real risks: a potential carry-over of combat-oriented mindsets that can clash with community policing, higher documented rates of force-related complaints or discharges in certain jurisdictions, and unaddressed transition/PTSD challenges that agencies often lack robust screening or support programs to mitigate. A balanced approach—pairing preferential hiring with mandatory transition training, ongoing mental-health resources, an emphasis on de-

**Table: 1**

<b>Vets to Cops in U.S.</b>	
<b>Pro Arguments</b>	<b>Con Arguments</b>
Well-versed in chain of command, exhibits strong discipline, and respects authority structures	May exhibit rigid thinking, authoritarian mindset, or difficulty adapting to flexible, community-oriented procedures
Experienced with uniforms, weapons handling, tactical training, and firearms proficiency	Tendency to default to adversarial or militarized responses rather than de-escalation, increasing risk of escalated force or civilian harm
Proven ability to perform calmly under high-stress and high-pressure conditions	Elevated risk of PTSD symptoms (e.g., hypervigilance, irritability), which can impair judgment, emotional control, or lead to over-reactions in policing contexts
Brings leadership experience, teamwork skills, maturity, and life experience to the role	Potential “warrior” culture or mindset that conflicts with modern “guardian” community policing ethos and strains citizen relations
Strong physical conditioning, fitness, and crisis-response capabilities	Challenges transitioning from combat rules of engagement (ROE) to constitutional policing, citizen rights, and de-escalation frameworks
Deep sense of duty, integrity, commitment to service, and public protection	Higher vulnerability to mental health issues, self-destructive behaviors (e.g., alcohol/drug use, suicide risk), or elevated citizen complaints/excessive-force incidents in some departments (data mixed across studies)

Table source: Lyle, P. (2026, April 9). Supported by: Center for Civilians in Conflict. (2021, January 13) and Weichselbaum, S., & Schwartzapfel, B. (2017, March 30)

escalation, and cultural-awareness programs—can maximize strengths while minimizing harms to both officers and the civilians they serve. This juxtaposition table is designed as a neutral recruitment discussion tool grounded in available evidence. According to Dr. Lyle, the following juxtaposition table provides a reasonable and balanced view of arguments for vets to civilian policing. The table provides a balanced argument on whether to hire or not to hire veteran combat troops straightaway into the ranks of civilian police forces.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

During the 1992 presidential campaign, Bill Clinton (as the Democratic nominee) prominently promised to put 100,000 additional police officers on the streets as a key part of his crime and public safety platform. He repeatedly contrasted this proactive approach with what he portrayed as President George H.W. Bush's insufficient action on crime, including criticisms that Bush had proposed cuts to federal assistance for local law enforcement and had not adequately supported officers on the front lines of the drug war and crime fight.

Clinton positioned himself as tougher and more practical on crime than the incumbent Bush (the War on Drugs), emphasizing community policing, hiring more officers (partly by recruiting military veterans and offering student loan forgiveness for police service), and taking a “get-tough” stance while criticizing Bush for using the crime issue divisively without delivering results. This promise was later enacted (in modified form) through the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (the “1994 Crime Bill”), which funded the COPS program to add 100,000 community police officers.

Since the 1970s, the number of better-armed Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams has risen a stunning 1,500%. In 1997, President Bill Clinton introduced the 1033 program, which allowed the Department of Defense to transfer surplus military equipment to law enforcement agencies. Since then, local agencies have received hundreds of millions of dollars of equipment every year, from relatively benign items like night-vision goggles to weapons of war like combat vehicles, assault rifles, and grenade launchers. *Can We Train American Police to Turn Away From Violence?* (n.d.).

Research suggests that elements of a militarized mindset remain embedded in segments of U. S. policing, particularly in training and tactical operations. “A recent

paper published by Brown University scholar Jessica Katzenstein decrees that while militarization has always been a feature of US law enforcement – starting as early as militarized slave patrols and colonial militias – the US response to 9/11 has significantly exacerbated police militarization” Rolle, K., the Center for Civilians in Conflict. (2021, January 13). Evidence suggests that the ideology will continue to play out in our local communities and in our national police agencies.

Federal law enforcement practices have recently drawn heightened public scrutiny regarding the visibility and style of interactions with civilians, particularly during immigration enforcement operations and large-scale federal deployments. Scholars have argued that highly militarized approaches to policing and enforcement can contribute to perceptions of adversarial policing and weaken public trust, particularly when agencies adopt a “warrior” orientation rather than a “guardian” model of public service (Stoughton, 2015). Research suggests that perceptions of enforcement intensity and militarization are shaped not only by operational practices but also by political discourse, media framing, and community experiences, regardless of presidential administration or political ideology (American Immigration Council, 2025).

Immigration enforcement practices under both the Obama and Trump administrations sparked public debate about the balance among border security, civil liberties, and community trust. While the Obama administration significantly expanded deportation efforts and immigration enforcement capacity, critics noted that later enforcement operations during the Trump era often appeared more visibly militarized due to tactical presentation, equipment, and highly publicized raids (American Immigration Council, 2025; Sierra & Sierra, 2025). Research on police legitimacy consistently demonstrates that communities are more likely to cooperate with law enforcement when officers are perceived as procedurally just, respectful, and service-oriented rather than operating within a militarized or occupation-style framework (Tyler, 2004; Stoughton, 2015).

The broader militarization of American policing has also been linked to federal equipment transfer programs, including the Department of Defense's 1033 Program, which enabled local agencies to acquire surplus military equipment such as armored vehicles, tactical gear, and assault weapons. Critics argue that such programs may unintentionally reinforce “warrior” mentalities and increase the symbolic distance between

police and the communities they serve (Rolle, 2021). Evidence from legitimacy research suggests that maintaining public trust requires balancing officer safety with community-oriented and guardian-based policing philosophies that emphasize de-escalation, communication, and procedural fairness (Mazerolle *et al.*, 2013).

“Former President Barack Obama formally removed 3 million noncitizens from the U.S. over two terms – more than any other president in American history, according to data from the Department of Homeland Security” Sierra, S., & Sierra, S., 2025, February 13).

### THE SPILLOVER EFFECT AND MENTAL HEALTH CRISES

Internal dysfunction does not remain contained. Burned-out or cynical officers may bring impatience, hostility, or ethical erosion into street-level encounters, undermining procedural justice and community trust (Todak & James, 2023; Nix *et al.*, 2020; Tyler & Jackson, 2021).

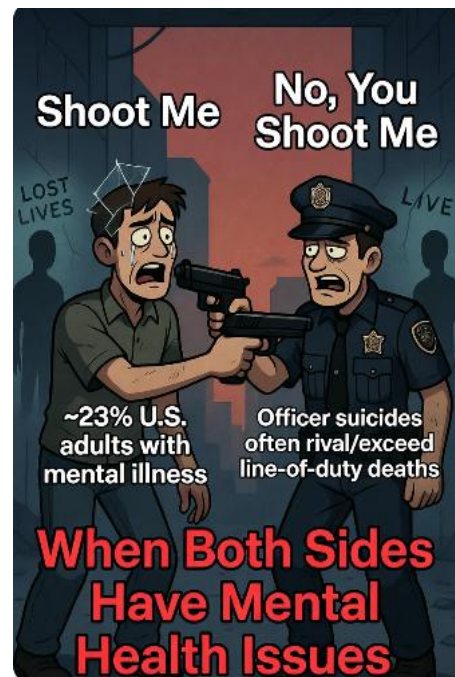
Police frequently respond to mental health crises—roughly 10% of calls involve individuals with severe mental illness—yet officers’ own unaddressed stress, sleep deprivation, and stigma around help-seeking (with up to 90% avoiding services) can impair de-escalation (Ray, 2019). LAPD data from 1998–2017 recorded 36 officer suicides, exceeding line-of-duty deaths, with surveys showing widespread awareness of resources but low utilization due to stigma (Lopez & Drechsler, 2018). Cases like the 2019 shooting of Leonard Shand, a Black man in mental distress killed by multiple officers despite less-lethal attempts, illustrate how stressed officers in a “warrior” culture may escalate to lethal force (Ray, 2019).

Empirical evidence supports spillover: Burnout correlates with more positive attitudes toward use of force and aggression (Kop & Euwema, 2001; Correia *et al.*, 2023). Fatigued or stressed officers show impaired emotional regulation and de-escalation (Todak & James, 2023). Community-level effects include reduced 911 calls and cooperation post-incidents (Bor *et al.*, 2018; Desmond *et al.*, 2016). Quasi-experimental studies link police violence exposure to population mental health declines, creating bidirectional distrust loops.

### Convergence of Risk Factors

When officers experiencing chronic stress encounter an individual in crisis, the interaction may produce

compounded risks. According to Lyle, these conditions create a high-risk convergence of organizational stressors, impaired decision-making, and operational vulnerabilities, increasing the likelihood of tragic outcomes. Now, add that to the media that wants to sensationalize lead stories for the nightly news, and tragedies, unfortunately, become a breeding ground for more distrust in the community. See Figure 2, which “illustrates the symbolic ‘perfect storm’, hence a compound operational vulnerability [Neme]; this aligns with spillover pathways.”



**Figure 2:** This [Neme] image visually merges two painful realities: Lyle, P. (2026). Symbolic standoff illustrating civilian mental health crises and police officer suicides and stress [AI-generated image]. Generated using Grok Imagine by xAI. <https://x.ai/grok>.

Bystander effects and diffusion of responsibility within toxic cultures can allow misconduct to go unchallenged, as seen in high-profile incidents (Pazzanese, 2020, June 8).

While this review primarily focuses on U.S. policing due to the availability of data and the prominence of legitimacy crises following events such as Ferguson, comparative international research highlights important variations in police culture, training, and public trust. Northern European policing models place greater emphasis on extended academy education, psychology, communication, and de-escalation training, which scholars associate with comparatively higher levels of

public confidence and police legitimacy (Can We Train American Police to Turn Away From Violence?, n.d.; Staubli, 2017). Cross-national studies further demonstrate that procedural justice principles generalize across democratic societies, although their effectiveness is shaped by differences in organizational culture, civilian oversight, and legal systems (Bradford & Jackson, 2018; Reisig *et al.*, 2014).

Research on cross-border and comparative policing also suggests that agencies operating within stronger accountability structures and community-oriented frameworks tend to experience fewer legitimacy crises and lower levels of adversarial policing culture (Hufnagel, 2016). Australian and European Union studies similarly support the conclusion that fair, respectful, and transparent policing practices enhance public cooperation and institutional trust, though cultural expectations and governance structures moderate these outcomes (Mazerolle *et al.*, 2013). Future U.S. policing research would benefit from incorporating comparative international benchmarks to better evaluate training models, officer wellness practices, accountability systems, and procedural justice outcomes.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Departments must prioritize officer mental health as integral to community safety. Virtual-reality training can improve recognition of mental illness versus noncompliance. Routine, non-punitive psychological support, peer networks, and leadership modeling of vulnerability can reduce stigma. Recruitment and promotion should emphasize emotional intelligence and cultural competence. Procedural justice training and early intervention systems can help shift culture before problems escalate.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Toxic police cultures harm officers and communities alike. Sustainable change demands internal reforms—ethical leadership, accountability mechanisms, wellness programs, and culturally competent hiring—paired with societal investments. Specifically:

1. Law enforcement leaders must model transparent, procedurally just practices and enforce accountability at all levels.
2. Agencies should implement proactive wellness and early intervention programs through wellness

check-ins, counseling services, and peer support initiatives to address burnout and moral disengagement. Adopting trauma-informed practices that acknowledge exposure to high-risk incidents is crucial to this field. Supervisors must also be trained to recognize signs of burnout to avoid long-term harm. Furthermore, balancing workload expectations is a beneficial tool in reducing chronic stress, improving decision-making, and community engagement.

3. Organizational transformation begins with recruitment and retention protocols. Hiring and promotion criteria should prioritize service orientation and emotional intelligence. Priority should be given to candidates who demonstrate empathy, problem-solving skills, and community-oriented values rather than just enforcement abilities.

Promotion systems must reward positive behavior aligned with community engagement and ethical practices rather than arrest quotas. Veterans from combat zones entering civilian law enforcement must serve at least 1 year of civilian service before becoming a sworn law enforcement officer.

4. Departments should expand community co-production models for shared problem-solving. Law enforcement agencies must engage communities as partners rather than rivals. Emphasis must be placed on relationship-building and collaboration with local agencies. Regular town hall meetings and well-defined communication channels may help bridge existing gaps. It is essential to prioritize the needs of marginalized communities, as they are often disproportionately impacted by policing practices. This way, their perspectives will be acknowledged.
5. Nationally, reinvest in mental health services, crisis intervention, housing stability, and social supports particularly in disadvantaged communities to alleviate root drivers of conflict and reduce the burden on police.

The United States should spend more federal dollars on mental health services for communities of color. This is because racial and ethnic minorities across various groups (black, Hispanic, Asian adults, etc.) face large disparities in access, availability, and use of mental health care (examples include lower service use at rates

of only 36–39% compared to white adults' rate of 50% when reporting fair/poor mental health, or not receiving services when needing them) due to cost, stigma, provider shortages, lack of culturally competent care, and systemic and institutional factors contributing to higher prevalence of untreated mental health conditions compared to their white counterparts, increasing the overall cost of mental illness to society Kaiser Family Foundation. (2024, May 23).

As noted in (KFF, 2024), the increased funding would address this care gap, decrease the economic costs of excess lifetime earnings lost and deaths that occur due to lack of treatment, and advance health equity by increasing the availability of mental health services that are culturally tailored, increasing the number of providers who work with these populations, and expanding mental health programs at the community level

With these steps, alongside improved data collection and longitudinal research by the Department of Justice, policing can move toward improving community support, officer resilience, and trust in community partnerships.

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Received on 11-04-2026

Accepted on 11-05-2026

Published on 20-05-2026

<https://doi.org/10.65879/3070-6335.2026.02.02>

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