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Traffic Police and Occupational Trauma: A Qualitative Exploration of Workplace Challenges

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Abstract

Traffic policing is a high-risk job, complemented by an abundance of stress-inducing factors coupled with unprecedented occupational challenges. Recent surge explored the occupational stressors but the intricate challenges and traumatic experiences faced by traffic police officers remain under-explored. This qualitative study aimed to delve into the occupational trauma experienced by traffic police officers to understand workplace challenges. 7 traffic police officers holding the rank of sub-inspector were included in the study. The analysis followed the six-phase reflexive thematic analysis, concluding with the four major themes of 1) insufficient safety equipment and protocol, 2) physical occupational hazards, 3) structural occupational neglect, and 4) public perception challenges. Findings indicate that exposure to traumatic events on the road can impact the officers' well-being, particularly in the absence of sufficient occupational assistance. Improving safety protocols, addressing organizational neglect, and fostering public empathy toward traffic police officers are critical for enhancing their resilience and effectiveness in law enforcement.

Keywords: Traffic Police, Traumatic Accident, Occupational Trauma

Introduction

Pakistan faces numerous challenges in terms of traffic management in its major cities. The cities' rapid urbanization, population growth, and successive floods in vehicular density have placed immense pressure on the traffic management system (Younas et al., 2015). This traffic congestion is well-documented and a critical issue in Pakistan's urban areas, including Rawalpindi. Several studies and reports have highlighted the challenges posed by urbanization, traffic congestion, and their effects on cities (Ali et al., 2015)

As a result, traffic police officers are confronted with an array of stressors globally such as extreme weather conditions, long hours of standing among inconsiderate drivers (Karumuri, 2020), experiencing and coping with hostage situations by the general population, and working at odd hours for emergencies. Moreover, the lack of resources and adequate rest breaks together with poor working conditions make the work environment of the traffic police department nerve-racking and highly impact their work effectiveness (Choudhary et al., 2015). Such situations serve as an accumulation of trauma daily and are usually termed occupational trauma i.e. any situation or event real or perceived that has a threatening impact on employees and therefore ends up in negative consequences not only for the worker but also for the general public (ISTSS, 2019).

The strain of repeated exposure to such taxing situations leads to physical health problems also in traffic police officers such as hypertension, cardiovascular diseases, respiratory disorders, gastrointestinal disorders, and musculoskeletal disorders (Pignatelli et al., 2003). Further surge unfolds that it also impacts the cognitive and emotional functioning of police officers including impairment of executive functions i.e. attention, memory, decision-making, mood regulation, and impulse control (McCarty et al., 2007) which can ultimately result in accidents, errors, injuries, or even fatalities for both themselves and others.

Overall trauma and stress due to job demands and occupational hazards affect the psychological well-being of police officers enormously, leading to anxiety, depression, burnout, and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and suicidal attempts (Edwards & Kotera, 2020).

In developed countries like the UK where all perquisites of effective job performance are available Police Firearms Officer Association (2017) reported that out of 130,000 police officers, 50% took sickness leave for mental health issues, and similar situations were reported in Australia as well. In Canada suicidal, ideation, plan, and attempt have also been stated among these front liners which is a matter of global concern for their own and other's safety (Carleton et al. 2018). A study by Dey et al. (2020) examined the sleep/wake circadian rhythm, and health complaints, that led to an increase in health issues such as headaches, backaches, joint pain, acidity, and constipation in traffic police officers.

It is also found that traffic police officers experience significantly higher levels of stress than their counterparts in other police departments, such as the crime branch or the security wing. It is more prevalent in South Asian literature where the researches reflect the absence of basic infrastructure, clarity of job demands, lack of road sense among the public at the road, and minimal compensation of salaries against high mentally and physically draining job demands make their work efficacy compromised. Less professional productivity of traffic police officers is also associated with high expectations and pressures from various sources including politicians, the public, and their managers (Mazianain, 2018). In India, almost 50% of the collected data of traffic professionals was suffering from substance abuse or mental ailments (Rajesh et al., 2017). Here a major occupational hazard of law-enforcing officers is a compromised work-life balance that does not allow the officers to detangle the occupational stresses. Further this work-life imbalance also restraints the unwinding time for recreational activities for them and serves as a major source of trauma for them (Besagas & Branzuela, 2023).

Moreover, it is also reported that traffic police professionals also had compromised hearing because of the unavailability of hearing protection devices in crowded and noisy areas (Kamran et al., 2021). Surge by Newell et al., 2021 brings out the themes of stigma, worries about confidentiality, and occupation-specific distress in traffic police officers. Huge literature unveils impact of the stress among professionals but very little investigation demonstrates the personality traits that bring them the ability to deal with the job demands and occupation needs. Available statistics show psychological stress was significantly related to negative personality traits such as neuroticism, psychoticism, and extroversion (Keramari, 2019).

In Pakistan, limited resources and unneeded occupational demands on law enforcement professionals, make it a stressful work environment (Bouckennooghe et al. 2016). Because they have a lot of responsibility in the country, traffic police officers are badly impacted by difficult occupations, making their contentment crucial for social advancement (Humayon et al. 2018).

Recent work guides they have extremely busy schedules, lack of defined duty hours, lack of basic infrastructure, and availability of adequate rest hours (Humayon

et al. 2018).

In Pakistan, there is a little surge in traffic police officers that reflects their burnout, higher stresses, and negative personality traits, building depression on the job but the impact of occupational trauma is not being in-depth explored. So, the study aims to shed light on how occupational trauma after traumatic experiences affects Pakistani traffic police officers well beings, and the stress relieving strategies used by them to deal with such distressing events. So that the result might help in creating intervention programs to improve the job satisfaction level and mental health of traffic police officers, thereby lowering accident risks.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

To recruit police officers for the study, permission of the Chief Traffic Officer of Rawalpindi was taken to access the participants' information from the psychological testing register recently conducted at the Traffic Head Quarter in August 2023. Volunteering participants were approached through email and phone numbers to schedule semi-structured interviews who agreed to join the research participation. Seven traffic police officers having the rank of sub-inspector were taken. The sample size was determined by data saturation, which is the point at which no new information is emerging from the data. Purposeful sampling was used which was the only way to find officers who had the relevant experience to provide insight into the occupational traumas faced by police officers in Rawalpindi. The police nominal roll helped me to verify the eligibility of the participants.

Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria of participants were

1. Traffic police officers who have a minimum of three years of practical experience in regulating and managing traffic on the roads.
2. Traffic police officers who have experienced at least one traumatic event while on duty.
3. Officers who have shown a history of collapsing under the exposure of trauma.

Exclusion Criteria

1. Traffic law enforcement officers who possess less than three years of practical experience in regulating and managing traffic on the roads.
2. Officers who have not experienced a traumatic event while on duty.

Instrument

The most appropriate method to get in-depth information on traffic police traumatic accidents/events experiences was to conduct in-person, semi-structured interviews. Data triangulation was used to reduce potential biases in the study. The interview guide was developed and followed for conducting interviews. It included open-ended questions, allowing participants to share their own experiences and knowledge about trauma experienced. It assisted in discovering new insights that might not have been previously known in the Rawalpindi police context.

Research Design

The phenomenological research design was used to approach the detailed analysis of lived experiences of occupational trauma in traffic police officers. The selection for this design included seven cases of traffic police officers who had been exposed to traumatic incidents on the road. The research was conducted in the form of interviews and observations to gain a deeper understanding of the event. It allowed for an in-depth exploration of their experience and the impact of trauma on their psychological and professional well-being.

Data Collection

The sample of the study consisted of 7 traffic police officers who consented to participate in the study, with in rank sub-inspector after permission granted by the Chief Traffic Officer of Rawalpindi. These participants were selected through a purposeful sampling technique. The interviews were conducted on-site. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. The observations were conducted in the work environment of the officers, and the focus was on the behaviors, interactions, and work practices.

Data Analysis

After data was collected through interviews it was manually transcribed and was analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis by Braun and Clark (2022). It is a six-phase process that includes familiarizing with the datasets, generating initial codes, making categories, searching and reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report theoretically. In the analysis, patterns and themes were identified. The data was analyzed inductively, starting with an open coding process to identify initial codes and categories. These codes and categories were then refined and grouped into theoretical themes. The themes were used to develop an understanding of the current physical and professional efficacy in contact with traumatic experiences on the road.

Procedure

Interviews were started after getting informed consent from the traffic police officers if they agreed to participate, every participating officer was guided about the confidentiality of the given information, and the research aim and purpose were explained. Before the interview, it was informed that the interview will require 45 to 60 min of the participant and it will be recorded. The researcher used a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions that were transcribed. The researcher expressed gratitude to the participants after each interview completion.

Ethical Considerations

This study followed ethical guidelines, including obtaining informed consent from the participants and ensuring that confidentiality was maintained. The participant was informed of the purpose and nature of the study and was allowed to ask questions and withdraw their participation at any time. The data collected was stored securely and confidentially and was used only for this study.

Participants were given full access not to answer any question they didn't want to respond to or share details. Moreover, participants could leave the interview at any time they feel to do so.

Results

Significant and prevalent codes and generated themes are provided as under. The research identified four emergent themes through a thorough process of reflexive thematic analysis.

1. Insufficient Safety Equipment and Protocol
2. Physical Occupational Hazards
3. Structural-Occupational Challenges
4. Public Perception Challenge

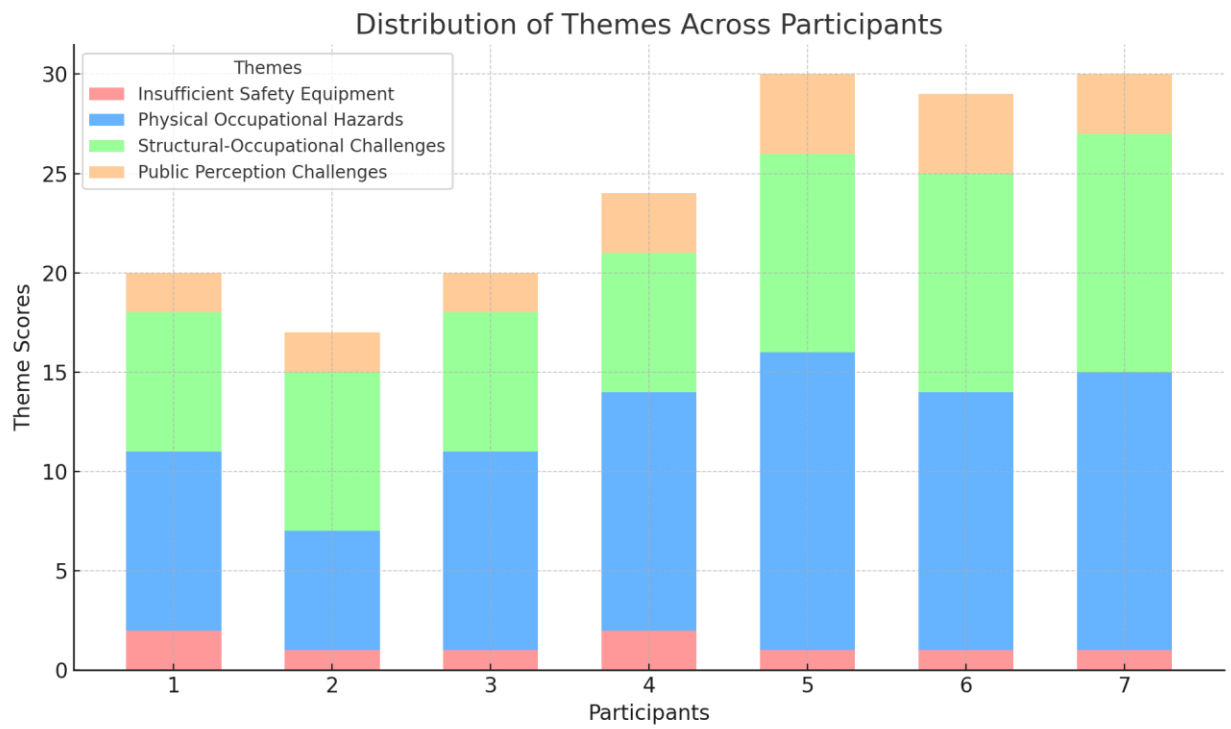
Table 1

Open Codes Comprising Individual Themes of Participants

Participant	Insufficient Safety Equipment and Protocol	Physical Occupational Hazards	Structural-Occupational Challenges	Public Perception Challenges	Total
1	2	9	7	2	20
2	1	6	8	2	17
3	1	10	7	2	20
4	2	12	7	3	24
5	1	15	10	4	30
6	1	13	11	4	29
7	1	14	12	3	30
Total	9	79	62	20	200

The table shows the prevalence of open codes in each theme and how much they are contributing to trauma for each participant. Statistically most trauma is related to theme 2 and theme 3 i.e. physical occupational challenges and structural occupational neglect.

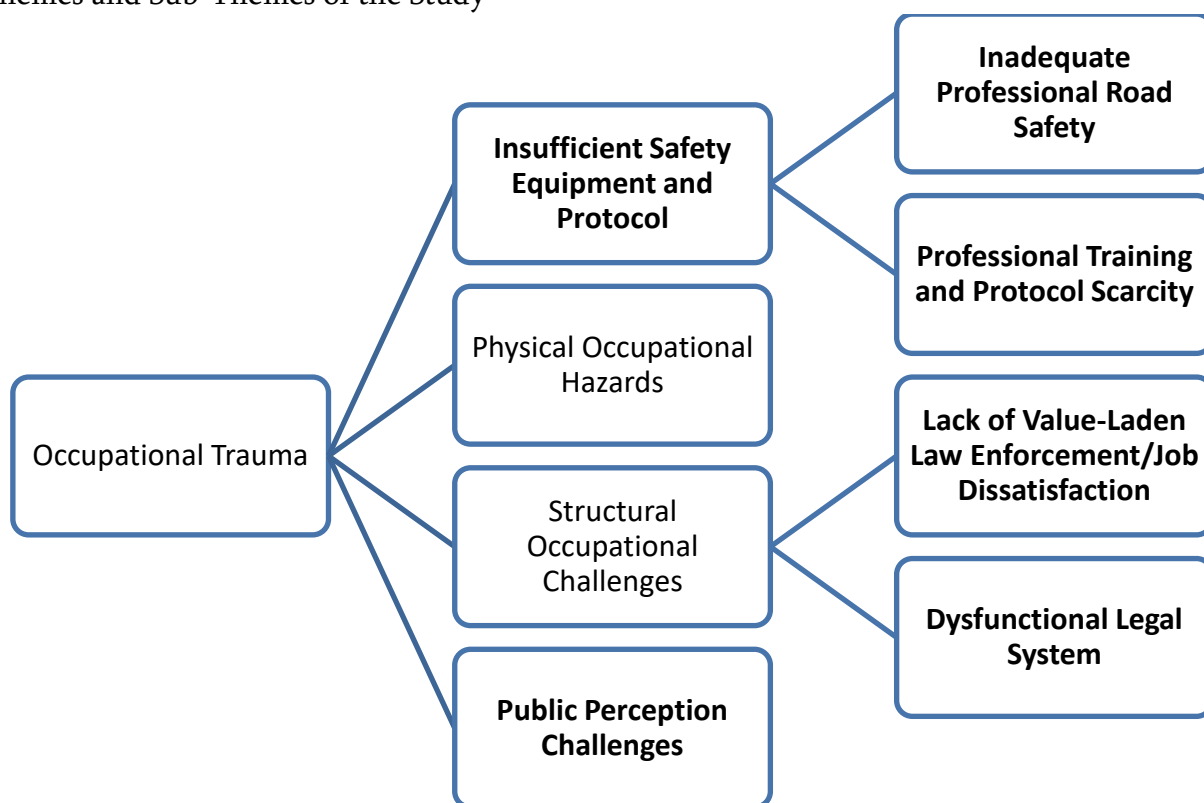
Figure 1
Theme-wise Frequency Analysis



The above bar chart reflects how much each theme is building occupational suffering in each participant of the study.

Fig 2:

Themes and Sub-Themes of the Study



The figure shows the breakdown of major themes of occupational trauma into respective subthemes.

Theme 1. Insufficient Safety Equipment and Protocol

The first emergent theme according to analysis was scarcity of basic infrastructural support. Participants reported that basic infrastructural deficiencies on the road made law enforcement difficult. There was a lack of body armor for professionals, cabins, traffic signals, operational traffic signals, barriers, and hearing aids on the roads. The theme is further categorized into two distinct sub-themes to provide a more detailed understanding of the challenges associated with safety and protocol.

Subtheme1: Inadequate Professional Road Safety

Traffic police professionals faced vulnerable situations due to defects in commuter vehicles. Instances of accidents caused by manufacturing defects in vehicles caused life-threatening injuries to the professionals and posed heavy strain on their physical emotional and mental health.

Participants highlighted instances where they appeared unprotected when the commuter vehicle defects contributed to accidents, emphasizing the need for enhanced safety laws.

Participant 5 said

“In September 2008, when I was 25 years old, an incident occurred. I tried to stop someone riding chingchi, but he took a U-turn, causing me to collide with him. The chingchi overturned, and I suffered an injury to my knee.”

Subtheme 2: Professional Training and Protocol Scarcity

Participants shed light on the protocol disparities i.e. while joining the police force it was reciprocated the major duties will include monitoring constables and ethical duty assignments. Moreover, regular career advancement assurance and necessary financial compensations will also be provided but it didn't follow the path as said and for the past 17 years they had been serving in the same rank.

2. Physical Occupational Hazards

Participants reported that the nature of their job is physically straining wherein they suffered hearing impairment, and musculoskeletal pains (leg and arm) due to continuous standing duty and manual handling of the traffic. All participants were survivors of traumatic accidents that resulted in leg injuries. Consequently, the analysis revealed that their knee and overall leg health had been significantly compromised. Further, all of the participants reported their muscular spasms and musculoskeletal pain.

Further disturbances in sleep rhythms, gastrointestinal issues, and the physical toll of work overload emerged as significant factors for building occupational trauma among participants. These challenges were exacerbated by exposure to extreme weather conditions and persistent noise pollution, which collectively created a taxing occupational environment.

One participant said;

“There is one drawback of hearing noise; we hear loud noises above this limit for eight to ten hours daily, which leads to various problems in our ears. Issues such as irritability, anger, inability to tolerate noise, constant ringing in the ears, and back pain, being prone to high blood pressure” (Participant 1)

3. Structural-Occupational Challenges

According to the participants, there was no healthcare facility provided by the government for accident-suffering professionals. The procedure to receive health care services was very long-term and tiring and none of the participants opted for it.

One participant said

“Even if you have a fever, you have to go to Base first. From there, you go to the police line doctor, and after that, you are sent to the headquarters doctor. After returning from there, you come back to the office, and then you can get permission.” (Participant 7)

Analysis revealed that at the level of government, there was no policy that was there to give the accident sufferers the facility of paid leaves or accident compensations. Salary deductions are a must if one is on long-term treatment and cannot attend duty for 22 days a month.

Subtheme1: Lack of Value-Laden Law Enforcement/Job Dissatisfaction:

The propagated value-laden law enforcement moto did not align with the reality of the participants' experiences. Participants reported dissatisfaction with non-value-laden policies.

On the departmental level, there were challenges with undefined duty hours, challan disparities, and departmental overload. Moreover, varied participants' responses were seen; some reported complete negligence and lack of cooperation,

while others received immense support regarding duty, financial assistance, and emotional support.

Participant further explained that

” When I was not on duty for 20 to 22 days, my salary is deducted for the absence, and I get leave without pay for up to four months. There was no financial support, and my salary was deducted for six months after my accident.” (Participant 4)

Subtheme 2: Dysfunctional Legal System

One of the principal challenges that all 7 law enforcement professionals faced was that there was no support available from the legal system and culprits inter-played their references for wrong deeds so the whole applicability of the law enforcement suffered on the road. In the traumatic events happened no significant action was taken legally to compensate for the loss of the officer.

4. Public Perception Challenges

The analysis reflects that the public perception challenge was invariable occupational trauma that every participant went through. Disrespecting, demeaning, and humiliating attitudes of the daily commuters were prevalent themes among participants. They reported there was a lack of cooperation that was seen among the civilians. It is also stated by the officers that there was also a difference in attitudes by people who are educated i.e. they were respectful and very often they comply with the officer on duty and order given by him. The behavior was cooperative and sophisticated in most cases.

Officers said that there is no educational curriculum that guides the respect of the government servants.

One participant reported

“The reality is that our general public lacks awareness entirely, and there's a severe absence of understanding. People who completely refuse to comply.” (Participant 4)

Discussion

In occupational challenges, there is a list of challenges that law enforcement officials come across. It includes limited infrastructure resources that include body armor, vehicles, wireless equipment, and uniform boots along with road managing infrastructure including barriers, cabinets, signals, and functional signals. Lee (2018) reflected that it is the responsibility of state and federal governments to use GDP for law enforcement and in a country like Pakistan when the basic infrastructure is not available at any level it brings trauma daily among professionals, making the road, commuter, and wardens safety at higher stake. The recent surge of the developed countries reflected that they spend their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on police as 1.4% was spent by France with an additional 250 million euros in the successive year, UK government spent £12.6 billion (Ogunyemi & Laguda, 2016) and in comparison to these countries Pakistan statistics show no GDP spent on the most important force to maintain peace and safe environment in the country is spent for their infrastructural and safety concerns.

Smollan (2015) also showed that when resources are not enough coupled with poor supervision it leads to strain, not only physical but also psychological and emotional which ultimately results in compromised functionality among traffic police officials.

One more important occupational trial was the scarcity of professional safety where no safety equipment was provided to the professionals for protecting themselves. Several wardens have endured challenges and life-threatening accidents resulting from defects in commuters' vehicles, leading to enduring repercussions throughout their entire lives. (Jahan et al., (2022).

Officers reported that their job started with the promises of regular career advancements and their supervising duties of constables but the reports also show that it was not at all the case when they landed on the fields. In 2009, their remuneration experienced a reduction to a single basic salary, marking a departure from the initial practice of receiving double basic salary despite consistently enduring extended work hours for a period spanning 17 years. They filed a case for restoration of double basic salary on which they were appointed in 2006 which was declined and set aside by the Supreme Court of Pakistan (case no. 661/2018).

In addition to that the nature of the job is physically draining and hazardous where participants have the duty of continuous standing for at least eight hours and it extends occasionally to 12 to 15 hours depending upon the requirement of the occasion they are handling. Numerous researchers have shown that traffic police officers face professional hazards that encompass musculoskeletal pain, upper limb discomfort due to manual handling of signals, and hearing disorders that exacerbate their stress levels (Fiaz et al., 2018). The same is true concerning the long work hours, partial sleep deprivation, and high workload. These factors can result in serious consequences of wrong decision-making in crucial situations. There is an increase in illness among law enforcement professionals, both physical and emotional when physiologic systems are out of harmony with environmental and occupational factors (Mawby & Zempi, 2018).

The latest report released by the Inspector General of Punjab in 2023 indicates that a significant number of traffic wardens operate in environments with noise levels ranging from 90 to 95 decibels, contributing to various physical and mental challenges for these professionals (TTP, 2023). Weather conditions also add to the situations of trauma where the professionals have no protection from heat rain or extreme cold (Ingle et al., 2005) in Rawalpindi Pakistan, there is a long summer season that extends to almost 6 months and many of the traffic wardens suffer from heat stroke, bear heat exposure disorders.

One of the prevalent occupational challenges or traumas for traffic police officers was a structural occupational deficiency at the government level that let to suffer the professionals in the larger aspect. It has been reported that there is no policy to facilitate the accident-sufferer traffic warden and this procedure is made more traumatic with minimal or no medical facilities it brings extreme emotional strain at the end of the traffic police officer going through a traumatic journey (Pildat, 2023; Ahmed 2021). Besagas & Branzuela, (2023) reported that the lack of

facilities at the government level has created emotional and mental strain on officers.

Job dissatisfaction is one of the consistent subjects that progressed around most of the interviews where participants were not satisfied with the job protocols along with their relevant compensations whether it be on departmental or government levels. Work done shows that employee demotivation leads to stress and trauma and creates room for different physical, emotional, and mental stresses that can completely impact the well-being of professionals. According to Paoline and Gau (2019), workers who are discontented with their jobs may engage in negative behaviors that affect their work quality, such as quitting, underperforming, avoiding tasks, and lowering the morale of their colleagues. Previous studies have shown that police officers' job satisfaction can be enhanced by organizational support. Job satisfaction among traffic police has not been extensively researched, but the existing literature indicates that it is a key factor for their work performance. (Zeng et al., 2020)

Conclusion

Important aspects to look into globally to strengthen the workforce mentally and physically is by improving educational qualification and awareness. Civilians have no awareness and sense to use the road properly. It is a fact that every individual has to use the road and lacking the basic education on how to use can cause them harm as well as to society at large. Moreover, theoretical and practical safety skills, officially declared 8-hour duty, revision of salaries and allowance of leave, and improving manpower of workforce can bring better-strengthened traffic police in the world, particularly in Pakistan.

Limitations of the Study

1. The study aimed to conduct an exploration of the occupational trauma and experiences of traffic police officers who were exposed to traumatic events on the road. The study included 7 participants from the traffic police force which can be improved in later work.
2. Another limitation is it included only sub-inspector-rank traffic police officers. Variations of other traffic police department ranks could have better representation of the whole traffic force.
3. Purposive sampling was used for the study which called for the inherent exclusiveness in participant selection and made the research findings limited for the generalization. These findings are reflections of the officers who have been through traumatic road accidents or events and for the general traffic police it has a limited application scope.
4. Moreover, another limitation of the study is that we included traffic wardens from only the city of Rawalpindi but to enhance the generalizability of the results, additional participants from other cities could be required to obtain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences.

Recommendations

The study finding opens the areas for further research in traffic police mental health. There are different recommendations that this study proposes.

Firstly, the occupational challenges need to be addressed more concerning the structural governmental policies that are essential to make for a better functioning traffic force with minimized occupational trauma.

Another important recommendation is officers should receive adequate training to prepare for unforeseen traumatic circumstances on the road. Such trials should be performed regularly during employment to deal with the trauma accumulation.

Implications

The foremost implication that is needed in the Pakistani culture is the social behavioral change toward occupational trauma in traffic police officers. These frontlines are there on the road to keep the safety and peace of the city maintained, no matter how much chaos is out there. However, study findings reflect that commuters' attitudes are very much disrespectful and non-compliant which asks for immediate change for a better functioning society altogether.

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