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Helping the helpers: The role of organizational support and peer influence on police officer receptivity to employee assistance programs

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate critical differences between police officer willingness to use and recommend an employee assistance program (EAP) to a peer, including the relationship between officer perceptions of macro-level organizational support and micro-level EAP support.

Design/methodology/approach – A survey of 213 police officers from a large, urban police department in the Northeast United States of America is used to evaluate the relationship between officer perceptions of the EAP and the officers' willingness to use and recommend the EAP to peers. Generalized linear regression models are used to evaluate the moderating effect of perceived organizational support (POS) on perceived EAP support.

Findings – The findings of this study suggest that POS strongly predicts willingness to use the EAP, but POS has no significant relationship with willingness to recommend the EAP. There is evidence that POS moderates the relationship of EAP support on willingness to recommend the EAP to a peer. When POS decreases, the relationship of EAP support with willingness to recommend the EAP to peers becomes stronger.

Research limitations/implications – The current study is limited by the study's focus on only one police department and the department's use of cross-sectional data, which may limit the generalizability of the results to agencies that differ in size and type.

Practical implications – This research has practical implications for those who seek to improve officer receptivity to mental health support and improve the quality of police services provided to the public. The findings demonstrate that improving officer willingness to recommend the EAP to peers may be a more sustainable pathway to addressing officer mental health than willingness to use the EAP considering the current movement toward police reform.

Originality/value – The research unveils significant differences in police officer decision-making between using the EAP and recommending it to a peer. The research also adds empirical evidence to existing research on the role of POS in policing and the altruistic, peer-focused nature of the police subculture.

Keywords – Police, stress, mental health, employee assistance program, perceived organizational support, peer support

Introduction

In 2021, USA police officer deaths in the line of duty increased 55 percent from the previous year (National Law Enforcement Memorial and Museum, 2021). While 61 officers were killed by gunfire, over twice as many officers (136) died by suicide during the same time frame suggesting that a greater threat to officers comes from within (Blue H.E.L.P., 2022). Suicide is a tangible manifestation of mental anguish, but it is like the tip of an iceberg and a symptom of the larger problem of untreated mental distress that looms beneath the surface. A recent national survey of police officers reports that over half of all respondents indicate family/relationship problems, sleep disturbances, irritability, isolation, and recurring, unwanted memories (Fraternal Order of Police, 2018).

Police officer mental health and stress coping has a direct relationship with work performance (Mourtgos et al, 2020; Nix & Wolf, 2016; Shane, 2010). Police officers who process and handle stress properly are less likely to resort to aggressive behavior when dealing with the public (Ermasova et al., 2020; Goff et al., 2013). In 2020, controversial events involving police use of force, such as the death of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, resulted in widespread social protests and calls for police reform. Recent research shows that socio-political stressors, including perceived public sentiment in the wake of contentious police-related deaths of persons of color and calls for police reform, present a significant challenge to officer mental health (Quick & Piza, 2022; Saunders et al., 2019). Some research also highlights the negative effects of socio-political stressors as leading to premature resignations (Mourtgos et al., 2022) and withdrawal from proactive policing (Morgan & Pally, 2016; Mourtgos et al., 2020). These findings suggest that while police reform efforts may be intended to heal police/community relations, they pose a

challenge to officer mental health and risk increasing tensions: an outcome all parties involved should seek to avoid.

In law enforcement agencies, employee assistance programs (EAP) are a primary conduit for addressing officer mental health. EAPs are internal support units managed by the organization to help employees cope with personal or professional problems (Ceka & Ermasova, 2021; Goldstein, 2006). Research on the effectiveness of EAPs in policing is limited. Officer perceptions of organizational support are linked to increased willingness to use the EAP (Tucker, 2015); however, police agency response to societal pressures to institute reform and increase accountability is also linked to decreased officer perception of agency support (Mourtgos et al, 2022).

This study addresses three critical gaps in the literature. It is the first study of its kind to examine differences between willingness to use the EAP and willingness to recommend the EAP to a peer. Secondly, it assesses the relationship between officer willingness and perceived support for the EAP from various social structures (peers, unions, or management). Only perceived peer support for the EAP has a positive relationship with officer willingness to recommend the program to peers. Lastly, this research evaluates whether perceived organizational support (POS) moderates the relationship between officer perceptions of the EAP and willingness and finds evidence of moderation for willingness to recommend the EAP to peers. The goal of this study is to provide practical guidance to police managers and policy makers given the need to execute reform while simultaneously addressing officer wellness by improving receptivity to mental health support.

Literature Review

Mental health issues in policing

The nature of police work exposes officers to significant mental health challenges; many are the byproduct of unavoidable and necessary elements of law enforcement and emergency response (Talavera-Velasco et al., 2018;; Violanti et al., 2016). Violanti et al. (2017) notes that frequent exposure to traumatic incidents, such as those involving fatalities or violent crimes, increases the likelihood of psychological distress, as well as depression and anxiety. In addition, trauma response also exposes officers to higher risk for substance abuse, suicidal ideation, and social phobias (Chopko et al., 2013; Kleim & Westphal, 2011; Violanti, 2014). Police response to traumatic incidents is also linked to hypervigilance, a state of constant arousal that derives from continuously evaluating one's environment from a threat-based perspective (Gilmartin, 2002), and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which may include such symptoms as aggression, hallucinations, sleep problems, recklessness, and mood disturbances. (McCaslin et al., 2006; Violanti, et al., 2017). Unique mental health risk factors in policing demand police departments offer robust intervention services for officers to minimize adverse consequences to both officers, members of the public, and the institution of policing.

Officer mental health is challenged by recent changes in the socio-political environment, which arose in the wake of controversial incidents surrounding disparate police use of force involving persons of color (Saunders et al., 2019). In a series of structured interviews (n=110), Saunders et al. (2019) identify common themes where officers implicate Black Lives Matter and partisan news coverage for perpetuating unfair portrayals of widespread police mistreatment of minority communities. Quick and Piza (2022), in a small sample study (n=63) of police officers, also identify negative public perception, unfair media portrayals of police treatment of minority

communities, and police reform policies as major perceived stressors. As public confidence and support for the police has declined, research also demonstrates that police officers are susceptible to feelings of inadequacy and several negative performance outcomes including hesitancy to engage suspects, unwillingness to work with communities, feeling unmotivated, and increased cynicism (Cebulak, 2001;; Nix et al., 2017; Wolfe & Nix, 2016). Therefore, recent socio-political events and the subsequent reform efforts pose increased threats to officer mental health and may negatively impact officer receptivity to mental health support.

Mental health stigma within the police subculture

Despite the need to address police officer mental health, officers are notably reluctant to engage agency sponsored mental health support (Ceka & Ermasova, 2021; Tucker, 2015). Although mental health stigma is not exclusive to the police, police officers endorse negative mental health stereotypes more strongly than the general public (Karaffa & Tochnov, 2013; Soomro & Yanos, 2018). According to a meta-analysis performed by Haugen et al. (2017), nearly one in three first responders experience stigma regarding mental health. The most frequently cited concerns are related to organizational distrust surrounding confidentiality and fear of adverse consequences. Cultural expectations, lack of organizational support, and organizational distrust are also noted by the US Department of Justice in the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice Report (2020) as leading factors preventing officers from seeking help. Therefore, increasing POS and trust is necessary to increase willingness to seek mental health support.

Stigma is also linked to pluralistic ignorance, a phenomenon where group members privately reject a behavior or belief, but act in accordance with falsely perceived group values to gain acceptance (Prentice & Miller, 1996). Pluralistic ignorance infuses the policing subculture,

which prioritizes group solidarity and prevents officers in need from seeking help (Karaffa & Koch, 2016; Miller & Morrison, 2009). Officers often refrain from discussing emotional discomfort and stress due to the falsely held belief that they are the only one experiencing negative mental health effects (Kirschman et al., 2013).

The full effect of mental health stigma within the police environment must be evaluated within the context of the police subculture. The concept of a unique subculture within policing is well-noted in the literature and consists of widely shared values, norms, and attitudes that arise as a coping response to the distinct danger, authority, and social isolation that infuses the officer's work environment (Paoline et al., 2000; Westley, 1970). There is strong pressure for officers to subscribe to the subculture's norms (Frewin & Tuffin, 1998). Those officers who do not see themselves as accepted within the subculture experience significantly higher levels of occupational stress than those that do (Rose et al., 2015). This evidence suggests that pluralistic ignorance takes on special significance within policing, where pressure to conform to cultural expectations results in officers suffering from higher levels of mental distress and greater reluctance to seek support (Blumenstein et al., 2012).

Classical police scholars, such as Neiderhoffer (1967) and Skolnick (1966), note the pervasive cynicism and solidarity that characterize the police subculture and results in a collective "us versus them" view of the public. This adversarial perspective also extends to officer views of management and results in high levels of organizational distrust (Enciso et al., 2017). Evidence also suggests that the police subculture is pervasive throughout all levels of the institution, including senior leadership. Ricciardelli (2020) finds that police management commonly holds cynical attitudes toward officers who seek mental health treatment, often viewing officers as "faking" to get out of work, and these attitudes contribute to officer reluctance to seek support.

The solidarity of the police subculture may help shape officer behavior either positively or negatively. Millar (2002) finds encouraging evidence that, while officers are reluctant to discuss receiving mental health counseling, those that do are supported by their colleagues. Peer support programs, where specially trained officers provide initial mental health support and referrals, show promise in improving officer receptivity to mental health support (Greenstone, 2005; Milliard, 2020; Velazquez & Hernandez, 2019). These findings suggest that appealing to the police subcultural values of solidarity, and supporting fellow officers, may offer a pathway to improve officer receptivity of mental health support: a pathway that is underexplored.

Employee assistance programs and their effectiveness

EAPs are a crucial resource for police departments to support their officers and address mental health. EAPs began in private industry during the 1940's with the hopes of assisting a troubled employee during the beginning stages of difficulty for the purpose of risk mitigation (Goldstein, 2006). As the strategy was embraced by law enforcement agencies, officers' distrust of the organization quickly extended to the EAP and continues to prevail today. Organizational offers of assistance are often perceived by officers as the department paying "lip service" to serve its own best interests, which are often to the detriment of an individual officer (Caplan, 2003; Goldstein, 2006). In order for police officers to be willing to utilize agency-sponsored mental health services, the organization's desire to help must be perceived as genuine (Ceka & Ermasova, 2021; Tucker, 2015).

Empirical research on the effectiveness of EAPs in policing is limited and has entirely focused on officer use, or willingness to use, the programs. In a small sample study of an external EAP program in New Jersey, Asen and Colon (1995) find that awareness and acceptance of an EAP are correlated. Officer concerns regarding confidentiality and stigma reduce willingness to

seek assistance from the EAP (Ceka & Ermasova, 2021; Tucker, 2015). Donnelly et al. (2015) find only 16.2% of officers report using their EAP and nearly 77% of respondents are not likely to seek EAP assistance for domestic violence (whether they are a victim or offender). They also find there is no significant difference in mental health indicators, such as alcohol use, domestic violence, and post-traumatic stress, between officers who use the EAP and those who do not. Despite the contradicting evidence regarding EAP effectiveness, officer perception of program effectiveness is linked to willingness to use the program (Ceka & Ermasova, 2021).

Officer perception of agency support for the EAP is a critical factor in officer willingness to use the EAP. In a study of police department counseling services in Alabama (n=1,114), Carlan and Nored (2008) find that officers who perceive their department as supportive of counseling, experience significantly less stress and are more willing to participate in counseling than officers who do not. In a study of police officers in Pennsylvania (n=673), Tucker (2015) finds that officers with higher levels of POS and officers who believe their department supports stress intervention services are more willing to utilize their EAP. Ceka and Ermasova (2021) find that officer belief that help-seeking inhibits career advancement reduces willingness to use the EAP. These perceptions are mediated by officer confidence that the EAP can provide meaningful support. Ceka and Ermasova argue that officers' "negative perceptions of help-seeking can be mitigated by the positive and supportive working environments that facilitate building trust and confidence in receiving adequate stress-assistance" (p. 303).

There is a dearth of empirical evidence regarding factors that contribute to officer willingness to recommend the EAP and whether there is an actual negative impact of officer help-seeking; however, the well-established reluctance within the police subculture to seek EAP support is grounded in the perception, whether accurate or not, that they cannot "trust" their department

(US Department of Justice, 2020). Trust is linked to police officer “risk-taking” behavior in other contexts as well, such as officer willingness to engage in proactive policing (Mourtgos et al, 2020). Therefore, improving officers’ trust in their organization may provide benefits that extend beyond improved officer mental health.

Perceived Organizational Support (POS) theory

The theory of POS uses a social exchange interpretation to argue that a symbiotic relationship exists between an employee’s perception of organizational support for his or her wellbeing and the employee’s level of commitment to the organization (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Social exchange is frequently observed in many employer/employee relations. For example, many employees will work long hours and volunteer for additional assignments under the belief that they will be rewarded by promotion or increased pay. Eisenberger argues that employees develop macro-level conceptions of their organization’s value of their worth and care for their wellbeing to assess the organization’s willingness to reward work effort. The perceptions of employees influence one another and can play a key role in the development of an organizational climate (Hemmelgarn et al., 2006). A caring and benevolent organizational climate contributes to an ethos of mutual support and trust, which is essential to promoting officer willingness to use the EAP (Ceka & Ermasova, 2021; Tucker, 2015).

Law enforcement-specific research links POS with improved mental health and emotional support, work performance, pro-social behavior, and perceived job effectiveness (Adebayo, 2005; Armeli et al., 1998; Boateng, 2014). POS is also significantly related to officer willingness to use the EAP (Tucker, 2015). These findings suggest that promoting POS within policing may provide an opportunity to combat deeply entrenched organizational distrust and provide benefits that directly impact police interaction with the community.

Current Study

Previous literature on POS and EAPs has established that officers are most willing to seek their agency's assistance for mental health issues when they trust and feel supported by their organization (Ceka & Ermasova, 2021; Tucker, 2015). POS theory argues that employees tend to evaluate organizational support globally, meaning they are inclined to evaluate the entire organization dichotomously as either entirely supportive or unsupportive (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Police departments function in highly politicized environments and at times, it may not be possible for agencies to foster officer perceptions of organizational support (Mourtgos et al., 2020; Mourtgos et al., 2022; Saunders et al., 2019). In response to political pressures, police leaders who embrace reform often find themselves in an adversarial relationship with police unions and veteran officers (Kindy & Berman, 2020). For example, consider the case of Eric Garner, who died as the result of police use of force. A New York City police officer was arrested, but a grand jury declined to indict the officer on any criminal charges. A lengthy federal civil rights investigation also resulted in no charges being filed against the officer. Yet, the officer was fired five years after Garner's death and many officers felt that the department succumbed to political pressure (Canon & Johnson, 2019). For those officers, it may be impossible for the department to foster perceptions of organizational support; therefore, messages from the EAP that officers are supported by their department may be viewed as contradictory and not credible. In order for these officers to use the EAP, another pathway besides POS must exist.

Research up to this point has consistently demonstrated that police officer perceptions of confidentiality, stigma, and POS independently affect willingness to seek assistance through the EAP (Ceka & Ermasova, 2021; Tucker, 2015). Despite extensive evidence that shows the strong influence of perceived peer approval on officer behavior (Frewin & Tuffin, 1998), no study has

evaluated the factors that influence officer willingness to *recommend* the EAP to fellow officers. This research assumes that because peers influence officer behavior, when officers encourage other officers to use the EAP, officers are more likely to use the EAP. Therefore, this study intends to extend knowledge surrounding POS and officer receptivity to EAP support by evaluating the nature of the relationship between predictors of personal EAP use and officer willingness to *recommend* the EAP to peers. Its goal is to identify factors that may be used to more effectively market EAPs, improve usage, and thereby improve officer mental health. Based on the literature which demonstrates the prevalence of stigma, the cohesive nature of the police subculture, and the relationship between POS and willingness to use the EAP, this research will test the following hypotheses:

(H1) There will be significant differences in the factors that predict officer willingness to use the EAP compared to willingness to recommend it to a peer.

(H2) Officer perception of peer and union support for the EAP will have a stronger relationship with willingness to use and recommend the EAP than administration support for the program.

(H3) POS moderates the relationship between EAP support and willingness to use/recommend the EAP.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

The study derives from a survey that was administered by a large, urban police department in the Northeast United States in 2021. The department has a high degree of specialization and a formal, bureaucratic reporting structure with multiple units tasked with distinct operational areas of responsibility. Police officers are represented by (rank-specific) labor unions and work under

the provisions of collective bargaining agreements. Officer actions are overseen by multiple layers of internal oversight, including an internal affairs unit, and an independent, external civilian complaint authority. Approximately one-third of the department's total workforce consists of civilian (non-sworn) employees. There are multiple patrol districts within the police department that are responsible for providing general police services within a specific geographic area. Each district also has a degree of specialization, with approximately half the officers being assigned to generic patrol functions and half being assigned to various specialized units (i.e. quality of life, domestic violence, school resource officers). The EAP is a unit with department-wide jurisdiction that proactively engages officers assigned to districts and responds to traumatic incidents to provide support.

The survey used by Asen and Colon (1995) was selected based on subject matter relevance and its widespread reference in the EAP literature. All employees assigned to patrol districts were sent an electronic survey by the department via an automated, email process server to group distribution lists from the unit that oversees the EAP. This process resulted in a convenience sample and does not provide access to the number of emails distributed; therefore, the total distribution is unknown. The survey was distributed one time; no reminders to complete the survey were distributed. Employees were assured anonymity and encouraged to participate in a voluntary survey to evaluate sources of stress and the department's wellness efforts. No personal identifiers were recorded. Employees who chose to participate were then directed to a third-party, electronic survey platform. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the City University of New York Integrated IRB (2022-0014-JohnJay) was obtained to use the data from the survey post-collection and an anonymized dataset of individual responses was provided to the author.

A total of 697 employees completed the survey. Since the study focused on police officers, civilian employee responses (50) and those that left their rank blank (304) were excluded from the sample. Listwise deletion was used to remove incomplete cases ($n = 213$). For sample demographics, see Table 1.

Table 1- Sample Demographics

Rank	n	Percent
Police Officer/Detective	174	81.69
Supervisor	39	18.31
Assignment		
Patrol	143	67.14
Non-Patrol	70	32.86
Years of Experience		
Less than 2	13	6.10
2 to 5	23	10.80
6 to 10	71	33.33
11 to 15	31	14.55
15 to 19	57	26.76
Over 20	18	8.45
Race/Ethnicity		
White/Caucasian	107	50.23
Black/African American	22	10.33
Hispanic	47	22.07
Other	37	17.37

($n = 213$)

Instrument

The agency made minor modifications to Asen and Colon's (1995) survey to make it more culturally relevant; for example, the name of the agency's EAP and specific labor unions were added for reference. Additional questions were also added to better capture the variables of interest, such as the dimension regarding POS. The survey consisted of 38 total questions divided into five

sections, three of which were used for this study. In total, the survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Measures

Independent variables: All independent variables are captured as ordinal-level data on a five point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral/not applicable; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree). Officer perceptions of the EAP's confidentiality were captured by a single survey item ("The EAP is confidential").

To test the relationship between various social constructs and officer willingness to use and/or recommend the EAP to peers, social support for the EAP is captured by 3 distinct variables: peer support for the EAP ("Members of the department support the EAP"), department administration support for the EAP ("The department's administration supports the EAP"), and union support for the EAP ("The unions (police officer, detective, sergeant unions, etc.) support the EAP"). Each of these social constructs represents a potential nuanced difference in officer perception of "other support". Peers represent other members most likely to be in the participant's immediate social circle based on day-to-day interactions. Unions in the sample police department are rank-specific; meaning, the police officer union only represents police officers; the sergeant union only represents sergeants, and so on. The union represents the "collective" labor interests of those members during contract bargaining with the city and it provides legal representation to members in both internal and external disciplinary matters. As such, to participants, the union likely represents perceived "collective" values of co-workers compared to the intimate day-to-day relationships represented by the peer support variable. Perceived administration support may either encourage or discourage officers to utilize the EAP depending on whether organizational trust and

POS exist. Exploring the value of each social support structure should help better inform practitioner strategies for program marketing and policy making.

POS is represented by the survey item that indicates “the police department, as an organization, really cares about my well-being”. Perceived support of the EAP is represented by the survey item that indicates belief that the “members of the EAP really care about my well-being”. Perceived support is attributed to “members” of the EAP rather than the entire unit because this research seeks to differentiate the effect of POS from officer perception that the individual members assigned to the EAP care about them. For the moderation analysis, both POS and EAP support were centered at the mean.

Control Variables: Due to a relatively small sample size, the number of control variables was selected based on the literature and to retain statistical power. The dataset was vulnerable to officers failing to complete demographic information which further reduced the sample size for regression analysis. For example, sex was not incorporated as a control variable due to 137 participants leaving the field blank or selecting “prefer not to answer”¹. Using sex as a control would significantly disadvantage the model.

This analysis controlled for receptivity to mental health support, race/ethnicity, years of experience with the department, rank, and assignment. To avoid well-noted challenges regarding mental health stigma (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020), the term “personal problem” was substituted for mental health, which is consistent with previous research (Asen & Colon, 1995). Police officer receptivity to mental health support was represented by a single item that assessed willingness to seek external mental health support (“If I had a personal problem, I would seek

¹ When sex is incorporated into the regression models as a control variable, the sample size is reduced from 213 to 183. The only noteworthy difference in results is the models that predict willingness to recommend the EAP lose significance for peer support ($p = 0.186$ compared to $p = 0.02$). The interaction term between POS and EAP support remains significant in the model that predicts willingness to recommend the EAP.

assistance from outside the department (i.e. private therapist, clergy, non-law enforcement friend, etc.)”.

Race/ethnicity was categorical and consisted of White/Caucasian, Black/African American, Hispanic (which combined White Hispanic and Black Hispanic), and other. Experience is an ordinal measure that represents years with the agency and is coded from 1 (less than 2 years) through 6 (more than 20 years). Rank was recoded into a dichotomous variable with police officer and detective coded as “0” and sergeant, lieutenant, and captain and above coded “1” to represent non-supervisory and supervisory roles in the agency. Assignment was also recoded into a dichotomous measure with patrol coded as “0” and other assignments, including special operations, administrative, and investigatory being categorized as “1”, signifying “non-patrol”.

Dependent Variables: There are two dependent variables; each captured by a separate item on the survey: Willingness to use agency sponsored mental health support (“If I had a personal problem, I would seek assistance from the EAP”) and willingness to refer a colleague to EAP (“I would recommend the EAP to another friend who is experiencing a personal or professional problem.”). Both are measured on a five point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral/not applicable; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree).

Analytical Approach

Spearman Rho correlation tests were conducted on all independent, dependent, and control variables to assess for multicollinearity. Several of the independent variables were excessively correlated (coefficient <0.70) including confidentiality, trustworthiness, success, and the ability to handle personal problems and professional problems. A new composite variable, “problems”, was created that combines the mean score of the ability to handle personal and professional problems into a composite index. Based on consistent findings in the literature that perceived confidentiality

is related to willingness to use the EAP, the decision was made to retain confidentiality and discard trustworthiness and success. Spearman Rho correlations were conducted again on the effected variables and all coefficients were deemed within the acceptable range (less than $r = 0.70$). Chi-Square tests were also conducted for each independent variable and dependent variable combination and all tests were significant at the $p < 0.000$ level, signifying salience of the predictors.

Skewness and kurtosis tests were conducted for each dependent variable. Given that the dependent variables did not follow a normal distribution, generalized linear regression was used due to its robustness to normality violations. Two generalized linear regression models were used for each of the two dependent variables to test the three hypotheses. First, two generalized models were used to test hypotheses one (H1) and two (H2), pertaining to differences between the dependent variables and the relationships with social constructs. Next to test hypothesis three (H3) and assess the moderating impact of POS on EAP support, two regression models with both the main effect and an interaction term were estimated. Regression findings are reported as exponential coefficients to communicate effect size and the relationship of the independent variables and the interaction term on each of the dependent variables.

Results

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2. On average, officers report positive perceptions regarding the EAP. On a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), the EAP's ability to address officer problems (3.39), confidentiality (3.27), and EAP support (3.57) all have mean scores between neutral and agree. Officer perceptions regarding social structure support for the EAP range from 3.14 (administration support) to 3.56 (union support). On average, officers

report the level to which their agency cares about their well-being as 1.96 (between disagree and strongly disagree), suggestive of low POS.

Table 2 - Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
Confidentiality	213	3.268	1.173	1	5
Peer Support	213	3.469	0.998	1	5
Admin Support	213	3.141	1.173	1	5
Union Support	213	3.559	0.938	1	5
Solve Problems	213	3.387	1.085	1	5
EAP Support	213	3.573	1.073	1	5
POS	213	1.962	1.169	1	5

POS = Perceived organizational support

EAP = Employee assistance program

Table 3 reports the findings of the first generalized linear model on the outcome measure of officer willingness to use the EAP. Four of the independent variables are significant predictors of officer willingness to use the EAP at the $p \leq 0.05$ level. Officers who perceived the EAP as confidential are 26% more likely to report increased levels of willingness to use the EAP [$\exp(b) = 1.264$, $p = 0.004$]. Officers who perceive higher levels of EAP support and care for their wellbeing are 16% more likely to report increased levels of willingness to use the program [$\exp(b) = 1.160$, $p = 0.043$]. Officers with higher levels of POS are 35% more likely to report increased levels of willingness to use the EAP [$\exp(b) = 1.354$, $p < 0.001$]. The strongest relationship is the ability to solve problems. Officers who perceive the EAP is able to solve problems are approximately 38% more likely to report increased levels of willingness to use it [$\exp(b) = 1.376$, $p = 0.001$].

Table 3 – Generalized linear regression model examining willingness to use the EAP

DV: Use EAP					
Variable	exp(b)	SE	z	p	95% CI
Confidentiality	1.264	0.101	2.92	0.004**	1.080 - 1.480
Peer support	1.025	0.091	0.28	0.782	0.862 - 1.219
Admin support	0.945	0.060	-0.89	0.373	0.834- 1.070
Union support	0.971	0.074	-0.38	0.705	0.836 - 1.129
Solve problems	1.376	0.129	3.40	0.001**	1.145 - 1.654
EAP support	1.160	0.085	2.03	0.043*	1.005 - 1.339
POS	1.354	0.085	4.82	0.000**	1.197 - 1.532
External support	1.041	0.059	0.72	0.471	0.933 - 1.163
Rank	0.980	0.156	-0.12	0.901	0.718 - 1.338
Assignment	1.026	0.133	0.20	0.843	0.796 - 1.322
Experience	0.967	0.043	-0.75	0.452	0.887 - 1.055
Race/Ethnicity (reference = White)					
Black	0.807	0.165	-1.05	0.293	0.540- 1.204
Hispanic	0.997	0.151	-0.02	0.987	0.742 - 1.341
Other	1.053	0.170	0.32	0.750	0.767 - 1.446
_cons	1.011	0.374	0.03	0.977	0.489 - 2.088

POS = Perceived organizational support

EAP = Employee assistance program

* = significant at the $p \leq 0.05$

** = significant at the $p \leq 0.01$

Table 4 reports the findings of the second generalized linear model on the outcome measure of officer willingness to recommend the EAP to a peer. Four of the independent variables are significant predictors of officer willingness to recommend the EAP at the $p \leq 0.05$ level. Effect sizes are moderate to strong. Officers who perceive the EAP as confidential are 18% more likely to report increased levels of willingness to recommend the EAP to a peer [exp(b) = 1.177, $p = 0.008$]. Officers who perceive higher levels of peer support for the EAP support are 17% more likely to report increased levels of willingness to recommend the program to a fellow officer [exp(b) = 1.175, $p = 0.017$]. Officers who perceive higher levels of EAP support and care for their

wellbeing are 16% more likely to report increased levels of willingness to use the program [exp(b) = 1.159, p = 0.008]. Once again, the strongest effect is the ability to solve problems. Officers who perceive the EAP is able to solve problems are approximately 60% more likely to report increased levels of willingness to recommend it to a peer [exp (b) = 1.595, p < 0.001]. POS is not significantly related to an officer’s willingness to recommend the EAP to a peer.

Table 4 – Generalized linear regression model examining willingness to recommend the EAP to a peer

DV: Recommend EAP					
Variable	exp(b)	SE	z	p	95% CI
Confidentiality	1.177	0.072	2.66	0.008**	1.044 – 1.327
Peer support	1.175	0.079	2.38	0.017*	1.030 – 1.341
Admin support	1.064	0.052	1.28	0.202	0.967 – 1.170
Union support	1.036	0.061	0.60	0.549	0.924 – 1.161
Solve problems	1.596	0.114	6.52	0.000**	1.387 – 1.836
EAP support	1.159	0.065	2.64	0.008**	1.039 – 1.293
POS	1.000	0.048	-0.00	0.999	0.910 – 1.099
External support	1.070	0.046	1.58	0.115	0.984 – 1.164
Rank	0.895	0.108	-0.92	0.359	0.706 – 1.135
Assignment	1.074	0.106	0.73	0.467	0.886 – 1.304
Experience	0.990	0.033	-0.31	0.758	0.927 – 1.057
Race/Ethnicity (reference = White)					
Black	1.401	0.219	2.16	0.031*	1.032 – 1.902
Hispanic	1.251	0.144	1.95	0.052	0.998 – 1.568
Other	1.198	0.148	1.46	0.144	0.940 - 1.526
_cons	0.755	0.213	-0.99	0.321	0.434 – 1.314

POS = Perceived organizational support
 EAP = Employee assistance program
 * = significant at the p<= 0.05
 ** = significant at the p <= 0.01

Table 5 reports the findings of the generalized linear model on the outcome measure of officer willingness to use the EAP with the interaction term added to assess the moderating role of POS on perceived EAP support. Officer perceptions of program confidentiality, ability to solve

problems, EAP support and POS remain significant predictors of officer willingness to use the EAP. The interaction term does not meet significance ($p = 0.134$); therefore, there is no evidence of a moderating effect of POS on EAP support and willingness to use the EAP. The null finding of moderation of POS on officer willingness to use the EAP indicates that POS is essential to the decision-making process to seek mental health support from the agency. No level of EAP support can override the significant relationship POS has with an officer deciding to self-refer to the EAP.

Table 5 – Generalized linear regression model assessing moderation between POS and EAP Support on willingness to use the EAP

DV: Use EAP					
Variable	exp(b)	SE	z	p	95% CI
Confidentiality	1.262	0.101	2.91	0.004**	1.080 - 1.476
Peer support	1.020	0.090	0.22	0.822	0.858 – 1.213
Admin support	0.944	0.060	-0.91	0.360	0.833 – 1.069
Union support	0.978	0.075	-0.29	0.769	0.841 – 1.136
Solve problems	1.358	0.128	3.26	0.001**	1.130 – 1.633
EAP support	1.196	0.091	2.36	0.018*	1.031 – 1.388
POS	1.383	0.090	5.05	0.000**	1.220 – 1.569
Interaction – POS on EAP Support	0.941	0.038	-1.50	0.134	.0870 – 1.019
External support	1.034	0.058	0.59	0.555	0.926 – 1.155
Rank	0.961	0.153	-0.25	0.804	0.704 – 1.313
Assignment	1.050	0.136	0.37	0.708	.0814 – 1.354
Experience	0.968	0.042	-0.75	0.453	0.888 – 1.054
Race/Ethnicity (reference = White)					
Black	0.792	0.162	-1.14	0.253	0.531 – 1.181
Hispanic	0.995	0.150	-0.03	0.975	0.741 – 1.337
Other	1.087	0.177	0.51	0.607	0.790 – 1.496
_cons	3.250	1.468	2.61	0.009	1.341 – 7.878

POS = Perceived organizational support

EAP = Employee assistance program

* = significant at the $p \leq 0.05$

** = significant at the $p \leq 0.01$

Table 6 reports the findings of the generalized linear model on the outcome measure of officer willingness to recommend the EAP to a peer with the interaction term added to assess the moderating role of POS on perceived EAP support. Officer perceptions of program confidentiality, peer support for the program, its ability to solve problems, and EAP support remain significant predictors of willingness to recommend the EAP to fellow officers. POS fails to meet significance ($p = 0.485$), indicating that at mean levels of EAP support, POS is not a significant predictor of willingness to recommend the EAP to a peer. The interaction term is significant ($p = 0.001$) with $\exp(b)$ of 0.908 and the z score indicates a negative association (-3.20). Therefore, there is evidence that the positive effect of EAP support is negatively moderated by POS. When POS decreases, the relationship of EAP support with willingness to recommend the EAP to peers becomes stronger. See figure 1. Higher levels of EAP support can override the negative relationship POS has on officer willingness to recommend the EAP to a peer. Therefore, even if POS is lacking and officers do not believe the department cares about and supports them, officers may still recommend the EAP to peers provided officers believe the EAP cares about and supports them.

Figure 1 – Moderation effect of POS on EAP support

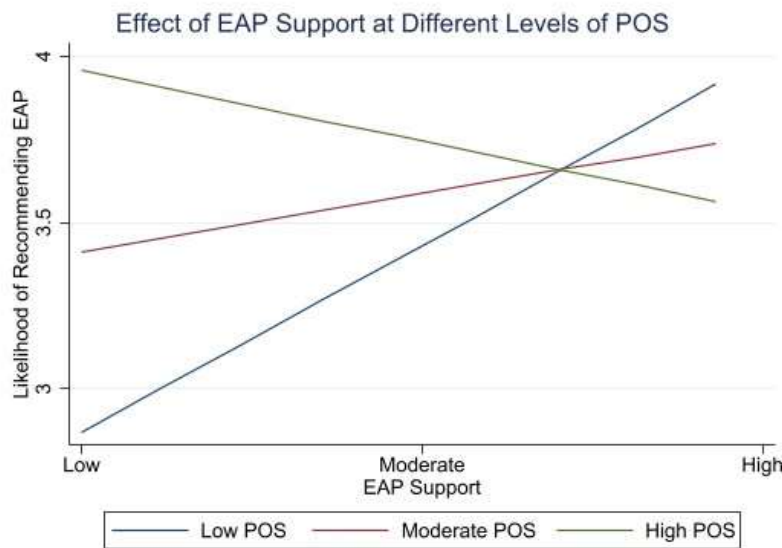


Table 6 – Generalized linear regression model assessing moderation between POS and EAP Support on willingness to recommend the EAP to a peer

DV: Recommend EAP					
Variable	exp(b)	SE	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Confidentiality	1.174	0.070	2.68	0.007**	1.044 – 1.320
Peer support	1.166	0.077	2.32	0.020*	1.024 – 1.328
Admin support	1.062	0.050	1.26	0.207	0.967 – 1.165
Union support	1.047	0.060	0.80	0.427	0.935 – 1.171
Solve problems	1.562	0.110	6.34	0.000**	1.361 – 1.793
EAP support	1.218	0.069	3.47	0.001**	1.089 – 1.361
POS	1.034	0.050	0.70	0.485	0.941 – 1.136
Interaction – POS on EAP Support	0.907	0.027	-3.20	0.001**	0.086 – 0.963
External support	1.058	.0446	1.33	0.184	0.974 – 1.149
Rank	0.867	0.103	-1.20	0.230	0.687 – 1.095
Assignment	1.115	0.108	1.12	0.264	0.921 – 1.348
Experience	0.990	0.033	-0.31	0.757	0.928 – 1.056
Race/Ethnicity (reference = White)					
Black	1.359	0.208	2.01	0.045*	1.008 – 1.834
Hispanic	1.247	0.140	1.96	0.050*	1.000 – 1.555
Other	1.261	0.154	1.91	0.057	0.993 – 1.601
_cons	1.448	0.489	1.09	0.274	0.746 – 2.808

POS = Perceived organizational support

EAP = Employee assistance program

* = significant at the $p \leq 0.05$

** = significant at the $p \leq 0.01$

Discussion

The proper performance of police duties requires officers possess a high-level of emotional regulation and mental stability. Yet, police officers are regularly exposed to occupational risk factors, including traumatic response, that negatively impact their mental health (Violanti et al., 2017). In addition, stigma surrounding mental health, which is reinforced at both the individual and organizational level, inhibits officers from seeking treatment (Karaffa & Tochnov, 2013). This

stigma is further strengthened by recent socio-political shifts that have placed police reform center-stage. Police leaders must maintain a delicate balance between supporting their officers and remaining sensitive to communal needs and desires. Given the potentially disastrous consequences poor officer mental health poses to the officer, co-workers, the agency, and the community, police leaders have a vested interest in providing EAPs that motivate officers in need to self-refer and recommend the services to colleagues. This study examined factors that contribute to officer willingness to both use and recommend the EAP to fellow officers.

When comparing the two outcome variables, willingness to use the EAP and willingness to recommend the EAP to a peer, there are several similarities in the performance of the analytical models. First, confidentiality, the ability to solve problems, and the perception that members of the EAP care about an officer's well-being are positively correlated with both dependent variables. This makes intuitive sense and is consistent with the literature on EAPs (Ceka & Ermasova, 2021; Tucker, 2015). Given the well-noted stigma surrounding mental health in policing, officers' willingness to use and recommend the EAP to peers is predicated on program confidentiality and the assurance that their reputation will not be compromised. It is also logical that officers must believe that the program can actually solve their problems before they will use or recommend the EAP to a colleague, otherwise it would not be worth the perceived risk. The strength of the relationship between confidentiality and the dependent variable is stronger for personal use than for recommending the program to a peer. The opposite is true for the ability to solve problems: the relationship is stronger for recommending the EAP to a peer than personal use. These findings suggest that confidentiality is a bigger factor in personal decision making, but program effectiveness is more influential in deciding to recommend the EAP to others. The effect of perceived EAP support is virtually identical for both outcome variables. For police leaders, EAP

marketing should focus on program confidentiality, effectiveness at solving problems, and EAP care for well-being.

There are also some notable differences in the two outcome variables which support the first hypothesis (H1) that there are distinct differences between willingness to use and willingness to recommend the EAP to others. The primary difference is that POS strongly predicts officer willingness to use the EAP, but it is not a significant predictor of willingness to recommend the EAP to a peer. Consistent with POS theory and the findings of Tucker (2015), this research finds that when officers trust the organization and believe the organization cares about their wellbeing, they are more willing to use the EAP. This study contributes to the literature by its somewhat surprising finding that POS is not linked to officer willingness to recommend the EAP to colleagues. It is possible that due to the altruistic nature of the police subculture, care for one's fellow officers supersedes the "social exchange" needed for personal use. In other words, officers' care for each other may lead them to recommend the EAP to a peer, even if they would not use it themselves because they do not trust the organization.

Another notable difference between the outcome variables is that perceived peer support for the EAP significantly predicts officer willingness to recommend the EAP to a peer, but not willingness to use the program. This finding partially conforms to the literature on pluralistic ignorance (Karaffa & Koch, 2016; Kirschman et al., 2013). Officers tend to act in ways that are consistent with peer expectations. Therefore, if officers believe peers support the EAP, they will be more likely to recommend the program to a peer. However, the lack of evidence that peer support for the EAP is linked to personal use of the EAP deviates from the literature, possibly due to the overwhelming influence of POS. Again, it seems that the requisite "social exchange" relationship between employer and employee can be overridden by concern for peers, but not by

concern for self. These results, coupled with the literature that notes the spontaneous nature of help-seeking, suggest that the chance of an officer making a calculated decision to self-refer to the EAP is exceedingly rare (Hammer & Vogel, 2013).

Regarding the second hypothesis (H2), the three variables of interest that represent social structure support (peer, administration, and union) are not significantly related to officer willingness to use of the EAP. Only peer support predicted willingness to recommend the EAP to a peer. These null findings are surprising and contrary with previous findings that administration support is significantly linked to use of the EAP (Tucker, 2015). It is important to note that in this study, POS was low for the sample signifying the average officer feels that the police department does not care about their well-being. The low score may be unique to the organization in the study, but the literature suggests it is at least partly a by-product of the current socio-political environment facing policing.

For the third hypothesis (H3), the null findings of moderation regarding POS on officer willingness to use the EAP suggest organizational support is essentially a “zero sum” game. It either exists or it does not. Officers view organizational support dichotomously: it either supports and cares about them or it does not. This phenomenon may be particularly vexing for police leaders who are regularly faced with policy and personnel decisions that may thwart POS. Many police departments spend considerable resources trying to convince officers that the department cares about them and that officers can seek agency support for mental health issues without fear of reprisal. Considering the deep organizational distrust that pervades policing (US Department of Justice, 2020), it is likely that these messages will fall on deaf ears. When the department must take negative action against an officer and it is perceived as unjust by fellow officers, POS and organizational trust are easily undermined. Considering the significant finding that POS moderates

the relationship between EAP support and officer willingness to recommend the EAP to a peer, police managers should market EAPs by tapping into the altruistic nature of policing and encouraging officers to look after their peers.

This is not to understate the usefulness of POS. Agencies should continue to make POS a priority and weave its principals into all personnel decisions. Departments and police leaders should push the message that they support and care about their officers. While POS has been linked to beneficial individual and organizational level outcomes (Adebayo, 2005; Armeli et al., 1998; Boateng, 2014), this researcher is unaware of any program evaluations that highlight best practices for developing POS. This is a gap in the literature that should be addressed by future research. In the meantime, to rely on POS as a mechanism of encouraging officers to self-report mental health issues is unrealistic and unsustainable given the current socio-political environment, where police leaders will undoubtedly need to make decisions that run counter to the police subculture.

The findings of this research suggest that grassroots programs that appeal to the police subculture will likely increase EAP use. Officers are deeply committed to supporting and helping fellow officers. EAPs should tailor their approach to encourage officers to “support” each other by remaining vigilant for signs of distress and encouraging officers to utilize the EAP, when necessary. The process of “checking-in” on the wellbeing of colleagues should be normalized similar to other culturally endorsed caretaking behavior, such as “backing up” fellow officers on dangerous calls or encouraging colleagues to wear ballistic vests. Peer support programs, where officers in various assignments receive additional mental health and support training, can help proliferate the importance of encouraging colleagues to use the EAP. The experiences of officers who have received EAP support and are willing to share their “success stories” should be leveraged in a manner that motivates officers to encourage those in need to seek support. For example, an

officer who was helped by the EAP might explain how fellow officers intervened or how they wish someone had encouraged them to seek support sooner. Given the dichotomous nature of POS and the need for police managers to remain responsive to public concerns, leaders should consider empowering line officers to endorse and promote EAPs, rather than solely relying on messages of organizational support, to improve officer use of the programs. Police leaders should also publicly endorse program confidentiality, its ability to solve problems, and peer support for the EAP as these are consistent predictors of willingness to use and recommend the program to others.

Despite best efforts, this study was limited in several key dimensions. This survey was distributed by the police department for quality assurance purposes. Although participants were assured of confidentiality and no personal identifiers were collected, it is possible many did not participate because they do not trust the agency. The dataset suffered from high levels of missing responses and those cases needed to be removed from the analysis. This was particularly true of the demographic questions, which may also be a symptom of participant distrust of the organization and fear that their identity may be discovered. Given the findings indicate very low levels of POS, greater representation in the sampling may provide even more robust findings that reinforce the importance of POS in receptivity to mental health support.

Furthermore, the nonprobability sampling methods used in the study also limit the generalizability of the findings. The officers involved in the study all worked at the same large, urban police department. Large, urban police departments in the United States face many similar challenges, particularly regarding officer distrust, stigma, and socio-political stressors; therefore, the results may be generalizable to similar departments. However, caution must be used in applying these findings to smaller departments. This study's validity is bound by the natural selection bias that derives from using a survey-based modality with a convenience sampling

technique. While the sampling strategy is far less than optimal, the method provided access to an exceedingly hard to reach population. The findings, while limited, provide insight into policing that should prove useful to practitioners in their efforts to address officer mental health.

As with most studies, the limitations of this research can best be addressed by more rigorous studies in the future. Larger sample studies should be conducted using multiple agencies to increase generalizability. Longitudinal studies that incorporate current events that challenge officer POS and examine their relationship with officer receptivity to mental health support would be particularly useful in testing causal relationships. Coupled with comparative analyses, these studies may be useful in identifying management techniques that promote POS and organizational trust. This type of research could provide the necessary foundation for determining best practices that can foster the necessary POS for officers to seek EAP support. Until then, the best defense against emotionally unstable officers may be the good offense of motivating officers to care for and refer colleagues in need to the EAP.

Conclusion

This study makes a valid contribution to the EAP literature in that it is the first of its kind to assess officer willingness to use and recommend the EAP to colleagues. Studies up to this point have exclusively focused on an officer's willingness to use the EAP. The primary difference between the two outcome variables is that POS has a strong relationship with officer willingness to use the EAP, but not with willingness to recommend the EAP to peers. Maintaining POS is particularly challenging for police leaders given the current public calls for police reform. Therefore, this study's findings suggest that motivating officers to "reach out" to peers and encourage fellow officers in need to contact the EAP is a more reliable conduit to mental health support than encouraging officers to self-report. Incorporating a "brother and sisters' keeper"

philosophy into EAP marketing and outreach will likely provide better dividends in the form of improved officer mental health, which should lead to better community service.

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