








“A Thin Line of Resilience”: South African Police Service Support Services for Murder Detectives – A Case Study of a selected Police Precinct in Durban, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Mental health and work-life balance have been increasingly recognised as a goal of law enforcement agencies worldwide. Murder detectives are frequently exposed to traumatic and brutal crime scenes, which can gradually lead to burnout, emotional distress, and decreased capacity to cope with stress. This study explored available counselling and support services provided to SAPS murder detectives. A case study design and a qualitative approach were used within the constructivist paradigm. Data were collected by in-depth interviews with eight (n = 8) murder detectives and two (n = 2) employees who were purposively sampled from a selected precinct in Durban. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The study revealed that although counselling and support services are available in SAPS, their use is limited and this was attributed to challenges such as not having enough trained health and wellness practitioners, high workload among health and wellness practitioners, limited knowledge of the services among detectives, workload which prevents detectives from prioritising counselling services, confidentiality concerns and religious barriers. Notwithstanding the challenges, murder detectives who utilise support services reported positive perceptions of SAPS support services. Based on the findings, it is recommended that employee health and wellness services be strengthened to provide immediate support to detectives. While stress is unavoidable, effective support structures should be in place to equip detectives with effective coping mechanisms.

Keywords: South African Police Service, Counselling, Support Services, Murder Detectives, Employee Health and Wellness

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INTRODUCTION

Occupational stress has been a growing concern in the police force. Detectives often experience work-related stress as a result of responding to traumatic events such as violent crimes, murder, graphic vehicle crashes, witnessing the death of a colleague and community violence. Responding to these incidents can affect the mental and physical health of detectives, leading to posttraumatic stress, suicide and depression.¹

¹ Gift Gugu Mona, Moses John Chimbari, and Charles Hongoro, “A Systematic Review on Occupational Hazards, Injuries and Diseases among Police Officers Worldwide: Policy Implications for the South African Police Service,” *Journal of Occupational Medicine and*

Stress in this study is contextualised as an individual state of tension when faced with difficult situations, limitations, or prospects.² Work-related stress can bring about extreme difficulties, particularly when no preventative measures are put into place. The proposition that the handling of murder cases exposes detectives to horrific scenes has been found to cause conduct and functional difficulties among detectives.³ Additionally, SAPS officers face a spectrum of health challenges as a result of occupational stress, including high blood pressure, diabetes and hypertension.⁴ Issues leading to stress include working in poor conditions, lack of support from management, low wages, biased disciplinary hearings also family issues, and a lack of social, emotional and inadequate counselling services as contributors to pressure and stress.⁵

Detectives are generally under pressure while expected to exert a high level of emotional control when dealing with murder cases. Additionally, detectives also conform to public expectations that they need to be strong, protect the public, maintain public order, and bring offenders to justice.⁶ In the process of meeting these expectations, cognitive challenges have been identified in the ability of detectives to switch from being empathetic and understanding towards victims to emotional detachment and emotionlessness.⁷ In addition to the trauma, the resilience of SAPS detectives is also challenged by the high workload. The gap identified in the study is the substantial imbalance of the ratio of detectives to the population of the country. As highlighted by SAPS, there are approximately 17,000 detectives who cater for the population of 62,027,503.⁸ As a result, detectives are burdened with high caseloads, which require them to be resilient in their line of work. This contributes to challenges faced by SAPS murder detectives in effectively addressing crime while taking care of their mental health. In the 2022/23 reporting year at SAPS, there were 138 psychological professionals, 57 Quality of Work Life professionals, 205 social workers and 190 chaplains who were responsible for providing counselling and support structures nationally, which also indicates a gap in terms of the fraction between SAPS police officers and Employee Health and Wellness (EHW) practitioners.⁹ This highlights the need for SAPS management to provide appropriate support structures to enhance coping strategies for its employees and improve the quality of work for detectives.

The rationale for this study was to explore psychological support services within SAPS aimed at assisting detectives working with murder cases. The primary purpose was to understand the nature and management of occupational stress among SAPS detectives regarding the support services from EHW. The objectives of this study were to explore the availability and accessibility of EHW support services within SAPS, get insights into the interplay between job demands, resources and well-being among murder detectives and understand the nature of the current support structures for murder detectives and identify areas for improvement based on the findings of the study. The significance of this study is linked to its potential to address critical issues affecting the well-being of murder detectives. Through the investigation of the detective's experiences, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the nature of the available support structures within SAPS. This is essential in identifying areas of vulnerability to guide the implementation of targeted interventions on police mental health. The study also provides

Toxicology 14, no. 1 (2019): 2; Makhawukana R V Mushwana, Indiran Govender, and Kathryn Nel, "Stress and Coping Mechanisms of Officers of the South African Police Service Based in Tzaneen, Limpopo Province, South Africa," *South African Journal of Psychiatry* 25, no. 1 (2019): 1–7.

² J. D. Borien, "Evaluation of the Differences in Perception toward Stress and Trauma Intervention Strategies in the South African Police Service" (University of the Western Cape, 2020).

³ Tebogo Matsie Evelyn Ramatsoma, "Exploring Helping Professions' Experiences of Psychological Trauma Management Programmes within the South African Police Services" (North-West University (South Africa), 2022).

⁴ Mona, Chimbari, and Hongoro, "A Systematic Review on Occupational Hazards, Injuries and Diseases among Police Officers Worldwide: Policy Implications for the South African Police Service."

⁵ Mushwana, Govender, and Nel, "Stress and Coping Mechanisms of Officers of the South African Police Service Based in Tzaneen, Limpopo Province, South Africa."

⁶ Anthony V. Bouza, *The Police Mystique: An Insider's Look at Cops, Crime, and the Criminal Justice System* (New York: Springer, 2013).

⁷ Mushwana, Govender, and Nel, "Stress and Coping Mechanisms of Officers of the South African Police Service Based in Tzaneen, Limpopo Province, South Africa."

⁸ Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, "High Case Load for Detectives Worries Police Committee," Parliament News, 2023, <https://www.parliament.gov.za/news/high-case-load-detectives-worries-police-committee.>; Statistics South Africa, "Statistical Release: Census 2022" (2022).

⁹ South African Police Service, "Annual Report of the Department of Police for the Period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023," 2023, https://www.saps.gov.za/about/stratframework/annual_report/2022_2023/Annual-Report-2022-23-final-draft-2023-10-12.pdf.

insights from EHW practitioners regarding available support services for detectives to contribute to the improved accessibility and appropriateness of support services.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Coping Strategies and Psycho-Social Support Mechanisms in the South African Police Service

Police officials are usually the first responders to crime events and the first contact person to people in distress, which results in high levels of trauma in their working environment.¹⁰ To cope with stress and trauma, police officers use either adaptive or maladaptive coping strategies.¹¹ Maladaptive coping strategies encompass taking prescribed or non-prescribed drugs, alcohol abuse, smoking, and overeating. This is the approach used by police officers, and it is ineffective and detrimental to police officers' overall well-being, posing physical and psychological health challenges.¹² Police officers who adopt adaptive coping strategies such as going to the gym and using counselling services experience less stress and anxiety.¹³

Other common coping strategies employed by police officers to cope with stress include problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies.¹⁴ Problem-focused coping strategies focus on proactive measures to deal with occupational stress, including taking responsibility and confronting the situations. Problem-focused coping mechanisms have been associated with a decrease in the occurrence of suicidal thoughts and a better general well-being. On the other hand, emotion-focused coping strategies include requesting social support, resilience, and positive reappraisal. Support shown by the supervisors to their employees has been found to reduce stress and burnout in police officials.¹⁵

Trauma Support Groups

Trauma debriefings are also used to cope with occupational stress in the police force. SAPS implements trauma debriefing, which works/operates on three levels, including the provision of on-the-scene, initial and formal debriefing sessions with the SAPS members.¹⁶ The debriefing units allow SAPS officers to identify and manage trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and assist in their well-being and prevent trauma from interfering with their daily lives or activities. Trauma debriefing sessions are essential in assisting police officers and victims to gain a sense of control, comprehend the traumatic experience and overcome feelings of guilt and helplessness. However, it has been found that despite knowing the purpose of the services, over 80% of police officers do not attend trauma debriefing sessions.¹⁷ This indicates the need for systems and programmes to encourage officers to attend support groups, as they allow officers to share their experiences and learn how their colleagues deal with trauma, thereby promoting solidarity and reducing the impact of trauma on officers.

Employee Health and Wellness Programme

Given the demanding nature and challenges that police officials face, it remains imperative for SAPS to prioritise the provision of psycho-social support for officers. To address mental health issues in the SAPS, an EHW, previously known as the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), was established.¹⁸ Police

¹⁰ Ariami Wassermann, Deon Meiring, and Jurgen Renier Becker, "Stress and Coping of Police Officers in the South African Police Service," *South African Journal of Psychology* 49, no. 1 (March 13, 2019): 97–108, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0081246318763059>.

¹¹ Mushwana, Govender, and Nel, "Stress and Coping Mechanisms of Officers of the South African Police Service Based in Tzaneen, Limpopo Province, South Africa."

¹² Mushwana, Govender, and Nel, "Stress and Coping Mechanisms of Officers of the South African Police Service Based in Tzaneen, Limpopo Province, South Africa."

¹³ Borien, "Evaluation of the Differences in Perception toward Stress and Trauma Intervention Strategies in the South African Police Service"; Ramaesela Linkie Thaba, *Organisational Culture and Employee Health and Wellness Programme Service Delivery in South African Police Service in Limpopo* (University of Pretoria (South Africa), 2018).

¹⁴ Ariami Wassermann, Deon Meiring, and Jurgen Renier Becker, "Stress and Coping of Police Officers in the South African Police Service," *South African Journal of Psychology* 49, no. 1 (2019): 97–108.

¹⁵ Wassermann, Meiring, and Becker, "Stress and Coping of Police Officers in the South African Police Service," 2019.

¹⁶ Borien, "Evaluation of the Differences in Perception toward Stress and Trauma Intervention Strategies in the South African Police Service."

¹⁷ Borien, "Evaluation of the Differences in Perception toward Stress and Trauma Intervention Strategies in the South African Police Service."

¹⁸ Mmaphuti Percy Dipela and Sello Sithole, "Under-Utilisation of Internal Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) Services by the South African Police Service in Lephalale, Limpopo Province," *Social Work* 57, no. 4 (2021): 486–98.

officers face severe challenges that negatively impact their mental, emotional, and spiritual state.¹⁹ The EHW supports employees to achieve a balanced work and personal life and increase work productivity.²⁰ The EHW initially focused on the challenges of substance abuse experienced by employees. At present, they have become comprehensive and offer a wide range of services.²¹ The EHW offers both professional and religious support, consisting of chaplains, social workers and psychologists who are available 24 hours a day and assist both SAPS employees and their families. The EHW also aids with identifying and providing solutions for issues related to substance abuse, stress, health challenges, legal or any other personal issues that may negatively affect employees. The EHW has been found to prevent stressful working conditions, illness, deviant behaviour and job-related risks and hazards.²²

Barriers to the Utilisation of Psycho-Social Support Services in the South African Police Service

Although there have been efforts from EHW to promote friendly and more accessible support services for police officers, it has been found that EHW services are hardly utilised.²³ There are several challenges associated with the use of support services within the SAPS. Other officers are not satisfied with trauma intervention programmes offered by the SAPS.²⁴ Also, police culture has caused limited access to support services.²⁵ Police officers are expected to be strong and not show signs of weakness, as they may be judged and/or isolated. Police culture often influences officers to disregard the personal danger and distress they encounter in their line of work. As a result, they underestimate the reality of the dangers of their work and the impact it has on their emotional, mental and psychological state. This is associated with the fear of being judged, yet it leads to a continuous trail of psychologically challenged or damaged police officers.²⁶

Stigma has been identified as another factor that hinders police officers from using counselling and support structures.²⁷ Studies have found that it is considered taboo for police officers to seek assistance and show signs of mental health issues.²⁸ They fear being considered weak or insane by their employers and colleagues. The police officers then try to hide their true feelings and uphold the expectations of being strong and brave. Police officers also believe that their careers might be in jeopardy if they participate in counselling programmes. Police officers usually refrain from participating in EHW intervention programmes due to a lack of trust, and they also perceive them as unproductive.²⁹ This perception is influenced by the lack of immediate referrals from SAPS management in cases where officers experience traumatic incidents. Police officers who use counselling services have been reported to have positive reviews for counselling services and support structures.³⁰

¹⁹ Bouwer E. Jonker, Lene Ilyna Graupner, and Lizelle Rossouw, "An Intervention Framework to Facilitate Psychological Trauma Management in High-Risk Occupations," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (March 27, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00530>.

²⁰ Dipela and Sithole, "Under-Utilisation of Internal Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) Services by the South African Police Service in Lephalale, Limpopo Province."

²¹ Thaba, *Organisational Culture and Employee Health and Wellness Programme Service Delivery in South African Police Service in Limpopo*.

²² Thaba, *Organisational Culture and Employee Health and Wellness Programme Service Delivery in South African Police Service in Limpopo*.

²³ Borien, "Evaluation of the Differences in Perception toward Stress and Trauma Intervention Strategies in the South African Police Service."

²⁴ R. V. Mabunda, *The Role of the Employee Assistance Programme in Managing Workplace Violence: The Experience of South African Police Service Members in the Greater Tzaneen Municipality* (University of Pretoria, 2019).

²⁵ Ramatsoma, "Exploring Helping Professions' Experiences of Psychological Trauma Management Programmes within the South African Police Services."

²⁶ Ramatsoma, "Exploring Helping Professions' Experiences of Psychological Trauma Management Programmes within the South African Police Services."

²⁷ The Witness, "Lack of Support Cited for Mental Health Crisis in SAPS," February 20, 2023, <https://www.citizen.co.za/witness/news/lack-of-support-cited-for-mental-health-crisis-in-saps>.

²⁸ Mabunda, *The Role of the Employee Assistance Programme in Managing Workplace Violence: The Experience of South African Police Service Members in the Greater Tzaneen Municipality*; The Witness, "Lack of Support Cited for Mental Health Crisis in SAPS."

²⁹ Nonhle Sibisi et al., "'Brutal Murder Scenes Are Traumatizing, and They're Mostly Indelible': Occupational Stressors and Mental Health among South African Police Service Murder Detectives at a Selected Station in Durban, South Africa," *Cogent Social Sciences* 8, no. 1 (2022): 2123146.

³⁰ Jane M Tucker, "Police Officer Willingness to Use Stress Intervention Services: The Role of Perceived Organizational Support (POS), Confidentiality and Stigma," *International Journal of Emergency Mental Health and Human Resilience* 17, no. 1 (2015): 304.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research study was guided by the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model. The main assumption of the JD-R model is that every occupation comprises job demands and job resources.³¹ Job demands are defined as “aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and psychological costs.”³² Examples are high-pressure work environments, environments that are emotionally demanding and environments with poor working conditions.³³ On the contrary, job resources (also known as health-protecting factors) are the physical, psychological, social, or organisational aspects of a job that may reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs, are functional in achieving work goals, and stimulate personal growth, learning, and development.³⁴ In the current study, the JD-R model provides a theoretical framework that is aligned with the dynamic nature of the police environment. The model provides an intricate play between the demands of police jobs and the resources required to enhance employees' overall well-being.

A second premise of the JD-R model is that job resources and job demand evoke two processes, i.e. health impairment process and the motivation process.³⁵ The first is a process of health impairment. This process suggests that demanding jobs wear out employees' mental and physical capacities and may lead to job burnout and health issues.³⁶ The second process insinuates that job resources stimulate employee motivation, promote work engagement and lead to low levels of cynicism.³⁷

Interaction of Job demands and Job resources

The JD-R model proposes that the interaction between job demands and job resources is important for the development of job strain and motivation. Furthermore, the model suggests that the presence of job resources may buffer the impact of job demands, such as burnout, because it influences motivation or work engagement. This represents the so-called “coping hypothesis”.^{38p.3} In a similar lens, the presence of job demands coupled with poor or absent job resources leads to burnout.³⁹

Murder detectives encounter numerous mental and emotional effects from the nature of their job. This requires the development of coping mechanisms and the reliance on support structures within the workplace. This theory applies to this study, to identify and evaluate the presence of the EHW Services, the effectiveness of the EHW Services, as well as to identify how this structure may help to buffer work repercussions, as well as how the lack of or ineffectiveness of the resource could act as a contributor to job performance. Therefore, this theory is relevant in highlighting the job demands experienced by the detectives and assessing the presence and effectiveness of the job resources available to the murder detectives.

METHODOLOGY

The research study used a qualitative research approach and a case study design within a constructivist paradigm to explore and describe the subjective experience of the participants. The constructivist paradigm recognises that reality and knowledge are socially constructed; hence, the design was selected to understand the socially constructed nature of detectives' experiences regarding SAPS support structures. The study was carried out in Inanda, which is one of the large townships located approximately 24 km from the central business district of the Durban metropolitan area. Inanda is known for its high rates of crime.

³¹ Evangelia Demerouti and Arnold B Bakker, “The Job Demands-Resources Model: Challenges for Future Research,” *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology* 37, no. 2 (2011): 1–9.

³² Tino Lesener, Burkhard Gusy, and Christine Wolter, “The Job Demands-Resources Model: A Meta-Analytic Review of Longitudinal Studies,” *Work & Stress* 33, no. 1 (2019): 76–103.

³³ Jessica Dos Santos Tome and Leoni van der Vaart, “Work Pressure, Emotional Demands and Work Performance among Information Technology Professionals in South Africa: The Role of Exhaustion and Depersonalisation,” *SA Journal of Human Resource Management* 18 (2020): 12.

³⁴ Arnold B Bakker and Evangelia Demerouti, “Job Demands–Resources Theory: Taking Stock and Looking Forward,” *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 22, no. 3 (2017): 273.

³⁵ Bakker and Demerouti, “Job Demands–Resources Theory: Taking Stock and Looking Forward.”

³⁶ Bakker and Demerouti, “Job Demands–Resources Theory: Taking Stock and Looking Forward.”

³⁷ Bakker and Demerouti, “Job Demands–Resources Theory: Taking Stock and Looking Forward.”

³⁸ Bakker and Demerouti, “Job Demands–Resources Theory: Taking Stock and Looking Forward.”

³⁹ Lesener, Gusy, and Wolter, “The Job Demands-Resources Model: A Meta-Analytic Review of Longitudinal Studies.”

The research study used purposive sampling to select the research participants. This sampling technique allowed the researcher to deliberately and strategically select participants with characteristics, experience, specialisation and most valuable data relevant to the aim and objectives of the study. Exclusion and inclusion criteria were designed to select participants with characteristics that align with the objectives of the study to achieve valid and relevant results.

Table 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Participant Group	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion criteria	Rationale	Final participants
Detectives	Officers from the Detective Services under the Serious and Violent Crimes Sub-directorate	Officers from Detective Services, but under the Criminal Record Centre, Forensic Science Laboratory and Specialised Investigations sub-directorates	Murder cases involve unique stressors, and they are relevant to the objective of the study	8
	Officers working on murder cases	Officers working on cases not involving murder	Commercial crimes and other units introduce potential variations	
	Officers from the Inanda police precinct	Retired officers	To obtain current perspectives from active-duty officers	
EHW Practitioners	Professional training in counselling and psychological support	Practitioners from Spiritual Services (e.g., chaplain)	Spiritual Services provides a distinct focus outside of counselling	2
	Practitioners from Social Work and Psychological Services	Retired practitioners	Current practitioners offer contemporary insights	
<i>Total included: (n=10) Total excluded: (n=5)</i>				

Murder detectives and EHWS staff were selected as a sample for this study because of their ability to answer the research question. The researcher intended to recruit the n=11 murder detectives in the station, including the branch commander. However, due to only n=8 detectives working within the serious and violent crimes section, specifically handling murder cases, n=8 detectives took part in the study. The EHWS was staffed by n=4 individuals; however, n=2 EHW workers took part in the study based on their scope of work and ability to provide relevant information in the study. The study therefore had a total number of n=10 participants, inclusive of the detectives and the EHW workers. Data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to gain a thorough insight into the matter that is being researched and generate in-depth data.⁴⁰ The duration of the interviews ranged from 45 to 60 minutes. Furthermore, an interview schedule was used to collect data. The formulation of the interview schedule prevented any deviation from the aim and objectives of the study.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the research data. Thematic analysis was considered useful as it allowed the researcher to identify and analyse themes that emerged from the interview during data

⁴⁰ Omolola A Adeoye-Olatunde and Nicole L Olenik, "Research and Scholarly Methods: Semi-structured Interviews," *Journal of the American College of Clinical Pharmacy* 4, no. 10 (2021): 1358–67.

collection.⁴¹ The choice of this method was influenced by its ability to classify and describe how participants in the sample perceive the current SAPS support structures. The research study followed the six phases of data analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study used the criteria by Lincoln and Guba, which include credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability.⁴² To ensure credibility, the researcher spent more time with the participants during the interviews. Credibility was further ensured by persistent observation to get holistic details about the aspects of the phenomenon under study. Dependability was achieved through the use of an audit trail and audio recordings. This approach ensured that the responses were recorded, transcribed and presented exactly as the participants had expressed. To ensure transferability, the researcher used thick descriptions to demonstrate that the study's findings can be relevant to different settings, conditions, and circumstances. Purposive sampling further enhanced the transferability of findings. Confirmability was achieved through the use of an audit trail.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee to conduct the study (HSSREC) (HSS/0633/018 M). Gatekeeper permission was also granted by the South African Police Service to conduct a study among detectives at Inanda Police Station. Written and informed consent was received from all research participants. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any time without consequences. Pseudonyms were used to maintain the anonymity of the participants.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

This section presents an overview of the support structures available to detectives. The themes generated include detectives' perceptions of SAPS support structures, the factors that promote or hinder the use of the support structures and the perception of EHW practitioners on the programmes offered to detectives.

Detectives' perceptions of SAPS support structures

To understand detectives' perceptions of the SAPS support services, it is important to get insights into the detectives' knowledge of the EHW, which is the main pillar of SAPS support services. However, two categories that speak to the knowledge of the EHW of detectives and their perceptions of the effectiveness of SAPS support services emerged. The perceptions are presented below:

Detectives expressed varying views on the SAPS EHW unit and its functions. The following excerpts illustrate how participants perceived the role of EHW.

There are chaplains, psychologists and psychiatrists and if you go to them sometimes you don't find them, or if you do find them, they don't really give you any immediate help cause they book you for a later date. By the time they tell you to come, you find that you are now ok, you would have found a way to live with that trauma (P-6).

One participant further noted the following:

There was a time when we had a psychologist, or it might have been a therapist, who had visited us. We also have one here, but the one we have here is a pastor and it did not help much because all you do is you basically talk about how you feel, but you don't feel any difference afterwards. Personally, I don't think there is a solution for it. I don't know if the pastor is well-equipped to assist us with psychology-related matters. (P4).

Furthermore, participants added that;

There is a department that deals with stress-related matters among members of the SAPS. I'm not sure about the name of that department because I have never been there, and I don't know if it's helping or not, but I have asked people who have been there they never get assisted with the trauma they have. I heard that they tell you to talk to others and not bottle up about the scenes that you have been exposed to, but in reality, that is not helping. Just talking about traumatic cases that

⁴¹ Helene Joffe, "Thematic Analysis," in *Qualitative Research Methods in Mental Health and Psychotherapy* (Wiley, 2011), 209–23, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119973249.ch15>.

⁴² Yvonna Lincoln and Egon G Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1985).

you have been exposed to won't change the psychological damage that has been done. We need solutions for our psychological being. Some of us end up being sick because of the stress that we get from work. Sometimes you think you have everything under control, but as time goes you realise that the stress is silently killing you. I don't know, but maybe our support service office is not empowered, but we really do need them because for some of us, the stress that we get at work ends up affecting us even in our homes. (P3)

The above submissions confirm that some detectives are informed about the EHW, which is the main support structure in the SAPS. They mentioned that there are chaplains, psychologists and psychiatrists. The South African Police Service explains Employee Health and Wellness as an interrelated programme consisting of social workers, psychologists and chaplains, which is aimed at ensuring a healthy and productive workforce through health and wellness programmes. However, participants mentioned concerns regarding the EHW; the participant raised concerns with regards to the availability of EHW practitioners. He said that sometimes when they are exposed to trauma, they do not get immediate assistance from EHW or they do not find them in their offices. Thaba found that the number of EHW personnel is not in accordance with the number of police officials, making it difficult for EHW workers to cater for all police timeously.⁴³

Other detectives indicated a lack of information and awareness of the availability of formal support services within their department. P7 reported that, during their years of handling murder cases, they had not received structured assistance, workshops, or programmes to help them cope with the stress and trauma of their work. The following views were cited to illustrate the above:

I can't really say anything with regard to that question because we don't have any support structure. Because currently, nothing effective has happened. In the five-year period, I have been dealing with murder cases I have never received any support whatsoever to cope with the stress. No workshops; nothing. I try to use my own coping mechanism (P7).

Another participant shared similar concerns.

No, we don't have programmes arranged for us by the department where we can get an opportunity to speak about the problems we face, because some crime scenes haunt you, and sometimes you find yourself even feeling afraid or scared because you feel like it's always with you (P8).

An understanding of the available support structures and their goals is the most important information that detectives can have. Knowing the structures increases their chances of using them.⁴⁴ Most detectives agreed that they knew the services that were available to assist them, while some indicated that they were not aware of any structures, as the offices of the EHW practitioners at the time the study was conducted were based at SAPS KwaMashu Police Station, which is 11km away from Inanda Police. A comparable finding was reported in Rajin's study, which showed that half of the participants were unaware of the EHW, while 22% were aware of the support services.⁴⁵

Detectives' perceptions of the effectiveness of SAPS support structures

Detectives shared varied perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the SAPS's EHW support structures in addressing occupational stress and trauma. Other participants commended the psychological support programmes for their positive impact, noting cases where detectives returned from interventions rejuvenated and stress-free.

They are very effective in dealing with occupational stress. They support our workers and help them deal with stress. We have had cases of people who came back rejuvenated and stress-free from these programs after going in very distraught and in critical situations (P3).

⁴³ Thaba, *Organisational Culture and Employee Health and Wellness Programme Service Delivery in South African Police Service in Limpopo.*

⁴⁴ Dipela and Sithole, "Under-Utilisation of Internal Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) Services by the South African Police Service in Lephalale, Limpopo Province."

⁴⁵ Jeanie Rajin, "Employee Assistance Programme in the South African Police Service : A Case Study of Moroka Police Station" (University of South Africa, 2012).

The participant indicated that the support structures were effective in assisting SAPS detectives with occupational stress. Having experience as a leader, the participant commented that there were cases where he witnessed detectives being rejuvenated after attending support services from the EHW. Other participants had different views on the effectiveness of the support structures. P5 and P6 expressed dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of the available support structures. P5 highlighted limited accessibility, noting that proactive initiatives such as workshops are absent.

The available support structures are not really effective. We have a priest and a social worker who we ask to come to us but it's not often, they only come if you requested them to. They don't come for workshops related to things (P5).

Similarly, P6 questioned the value of counselling sessions, pointing out that there was no feedback or follow-up after the meetings.

I don't see the support structures as effective because even after sessions with the people who provide counselling, they don't even give you feedback (P6)

Another participant had the following to say:

They are not effective because the only supportive structure I can think of is the one I mentioned, which is the priest who comes and he makes you talk about things you worry about, things that make you sick or things you face every day, but it does not help because we only talk about it. You see, when you talk about something that traumatises you, it comes back. To me, it makes me mentally ill or disturbed again because you relive it. The only thing that helps me is to get more time to just rest, which is very odd. We always argue about that because after they have left for the last session, they take notes, but they don't bring feedback (P5).

One of the participants explained that the support structure that he is aware of is the pastor. He explained that the reason he is not keen on using support services is because they revived traumatic memories that he wanted to forget. Violanti referred to this as a maladaptive coping mechanism, as it is a temporary escape from pain.⁴⁶ Violanti further proposed that trauma repression results in severe psychological damage to an individual. Maabela's study on perceptions of the SAPS members' support services found that some members of the SAPS did not view the support programmes such being beneficial to them; they considered them as a process that is there to make them relive their traumatic experiences that they want to forget.⁴⁷ Moreover, some participants indicated that even if they attended the workshops, they did not receive any feedback. Boshoff and colleagues found that 50% of the respondents admitted to receiving feedback from EHW workers, whereas 39% indicated that they did not receive any feedback from the EAP workers.⁴⁸ This indicates that trust and reliability in the EHW services remain an issue for SAPS detectives working in Inanda.

- ***Work Demands as a Barrier to Utilising Support Services***

Detectives reported that heavy workloads and operational demands severely limited their ability to participate in available support services. P1 below identified high workloads as a significant barrier to using available support services. While acknowledging the existence of programmes, the participant explained that attending them would cause work to accumulate, making it impractical to take time away. As a result, they were unable to assess the effectiveness of the services, since lack of time prevented them from accessing them. The following examples are cited to illustrate the above:

There are programmes meant to help us, but they don't give us time to attend because if you leave to attend support services, your work will pile up, so what's the point? I don't know if they're effective or not, we don't have time to use them (P1).

⁴⁶ John Violanti, *Occupation under Siege: Resolving Mental Health Crises in Police Work*, vol. 1 (Charles C Thomas Publisher, 2021).

⁴⁷ J. Maabela, *Perceptions of Police Officers on Counselling and Support Services in the SAPS* (University of Limpopo, 2015).

⁴⁸ Pieter Boshoff and Herman Strydom, "Exploring Programmes to Support Police Officials Exposed to Trauma," *Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development* 27, no. 1 (2015): 89–117.

P7 emphasised that both time constraints and the location of services limited their ability to access support services. The participant felt that the support services should be organised and brought directly to them at their police station. Managing a high caseload made it impractical to leave work, especially since, at the time of the research, the EHW offices were situated at a police station approximately 10 km from the precinct. For P7, this distance, combined with workload demands, made attending support services a challenge.

Our support structures are not effective; we don't get that kind of support, and it's not my job to go asking or looking for such programs, but they have to arrange for someone to come to me. Because for me, to leave these 115 dockets that I have and go looking for help will waste a lot of my time, because the only help we get is found in KwaMashu. So, imagine the time I would spend going there to make an appointment and wait for a response; there is a lot I could do, and not only that, but a lot of work is coming in as well (P7).

This is in line with the findings of Boshoff and his colleagues, who indicated that police officers do not attend SAPS support programmes due to the high workloads and less time at their disposal.⁴⁹ It is also interesting to note the discrepancy in the comments made by the EHW personnel and those of the detectives. It was noted from the comments made by the participants from the EHW that they have sessions with detectives at least once a month. Rajin's findings indicate that one of the factors that resulted in the lack of attendance to the EHW programmes was the lack of communication and marketing between the EHW office and the station.⁵⁰

- **Limited Understanding of the Practical Realities of Detective Work**

The effectiveness of SAPS's EHW services was perceived to be hindered by a limited understanding of the practical realities of detective work, which affected the relevance of interventions. Participants highlighted a disconnect between the support services provided and the actual, day-to-day challenges encountered in their roles. One participant explained:

Our support service office needs more skilled people who will be able to deal with our issues. They don't really come to us and see the nature of our job; they don't come to offer us lessons on how to cope with stress as we work with murder cases. The only thing I know is that when you have problems you need to approach them but I would have really preferred if they can come to us on a monthly basis and give us workshops on how can we cope at work given the nature of the job that we do, how can we stay motivated, not just to sit in their offices and wait for us to come to them because sometimes one may think that they are coping but if we could have more interactions with them through workshops one may easily realise that they're in need of psychological help (P2).

P2's account points to a perceived lack of direct engagement with detectives' working realities. The participant emphasised that support staff rarely visit precincts to observe the nature of the work or to deliver practical guidance on managing the stress associated with investigating murder cases. Another participant reflected on the problem and highlighted that:

I think the EHW people need to see our working conditions; they need to be there and experience what we go through at the crime scenes. I think they know only theory, and they fail to help us who have practically experienced trauma and stress. Because what we do as a team is to go out and talk with each other about our experiences, we share all the trauma and graphic scenes with our colleagues because they better understand what we go through, they go through the same experiences as ours (P5).

P5 also affirmed the view that EHW personnel lack practical insight into the realities of detective work. P5 emphasised the importance of supporting staff visiting crime scenes and seeing first-hand the

⁴⁹ Boshoff and Strydom, "Exploring Programmes to Support Police Officials Exposed to Trauma."

⁵⁰ Rajin, "Employee Assistance Programme in the South African Police Service : A Case Study of Moroka Police Station."

conditions under which detectives operate, arguing that such exposure is essential for developing relevant and effective interventions. According to P5, current EHW practitioners possess theoretical knowledge but are unable to adequately assist those who endure the practical, often traumatic, aspects of the job. This highlights the perceived gap between theoretical understanding and the lived experience of trauma.

Employee, Health and Wellness workers' perceptions of SAPS support services

There are strategies in place to minimise occupational stress in SAPS. Primary prevention programmes are the programmes used by SAPS to minimise the effects of occupational stress in the organisation by making interventions before a problem begins.⁵¹ These programmes include pre-deployment briefing, pre-selection screening, induction training and life skills programme presentations by internal and external professionals and sports activities.⁵² EHW practitioners provided their perspectives on the support services offered within SAPS, reflecting on both the strengths and the challenges of current interventions. Their insights offered an internal view of how these services are designed, implemented, and experienced from a service-provider standpoint, complementing the accounts shared by detectives. These perspectives contextualised the alignment and disconnect between the intended objectives of EHW programmes and the realities of their delivery in high-stress policing environments. Below are the perceptions of the detectives on the SAPS programmes for murder detectives exposed to traumatic and graphic environments.

I'd say that our structures are effective, and we always try to be available for the members. It's very important for members to attend workshops. Maybe some of them feel or see programmes as not important, you know, there's a saying that cowboys don't cry, that we're strong, we can handle anything. So what they do is, they bottle things up, and they also don't attend workshops. There's a lot of work involved, maybe they feel that they're pressured or feel they do so much and they need to rest rather than go to and sit in a workshop. Perhaps they feel "they're wasting their time." Our workshops are not voluntary; we usually do them in the mornings, when we come, we prepare and need to know the exact number of members coming. But they always give a valid reason for their absence from the workshops (P-B).

P-B described the EHW structures as effective, emphasising the team's efforts to remain available to SAPS members and the importance of workshop attendance. However, the participant acknowledged that some members perceive the programmes as unimportant or unnecessary, citing a prevailing policing culture that values emotional toughness, captured in the saying "cowboys don't cry." According to P-B, this mindset leads detectives to internalise stress and avoid participation in wellness activities. Additional factors that contribute to low attendance also include heavy workloads, the need for rest, and the perception that workshops consume valuable time. This perspective suggests that cultural attitudes towards resilience, combined with operational pressures, act as barriers to the full use of EHW initiatives. Rajin similarly found that EHW practitioners were of the view that police officers are usually absent from the workshops despite the early communication provided in terms of the venue, time and date.⁵³ The study revealed that in some cases police officers would make appointments and fail to make them. This was conceived as a challenge as it distorts the effectiveness of the programme; thus, the importance of attending the sessions was emphasised.

I wouldn't say there is enough support given to SAPS detectives. I don't want to lie because, first, there are challenges, which include a shortage of EHW workers. I attend to five stations. Sometimes we don't have enough resources, like cars and projectors, but we try to work with what we have. The organisation is trying its best to look after its employees. You get detectives during the parade or 6 in the morning, but you can't attend to all the stations (P-A).

⁵¹ Boshoff and Strydom, "Exploring Programmes to Support Police Officials Exposed to Trauma."

⁵² Johan Herman Cronje and Makhosonke Julias Vilakazi, "Secondary Traumatic Stress in Police Detective Officers Dealing with Complainants of Sexual Crimes," *South African Journal of Psychology* 50, no. 4 (2020): 520–29.

⁵³ Rajin, "Employee Assistance Programme in the South African Police Service : A Case Study of Moroka Police Station."

P-A acknowledged that the support provided to SAPS detectives is insufficient, attributing this to several operational challenges. A key issue identified was the shortage of EHW personnel, the participant responsible for servicing five police stations. Limited resources, such as a lack of vehicles and projectors, further constrained service delivery. Although EHW was perceived as effective, the logistical difficulties meant that EHW workers did not consistently reach all stations. This account highlights how staffing shortages and resource limitations reduce the reach and consistency of support services, despite the intention to provide adequate care. The participant further mentioned challenges with the cases involving the management. They described this as an environment that is not healthy for detectives, citing that, if their stressors emanate from the management they serve, the effectiveness of the sessions will be dull as they will continue to be exposed to the same stressor. This links with the study conducted by Boshof and colleagues, stating that police management contributes to the occupational stress experienced by police officers.⁵⁴ Terblanche and Van Wyk identified factors such as poor managerial style and incompetence from the management as being responsible for work-related stress.⁵⁵ This raises the need for the SAPS management to attend workshops, sessions and all other EHW programmes since they play a crucial part in establishing a healthy working environment for the police. During the interviews, the problems associated with conducting sessions with the management were noted and presented below: One participant revealed that the problem with having sessions with management is their perceptions of being an ideal police.

We assist even the SAPS management; we treat all of them with equity and equality, but sometimes a lot of them do not want to come out simply because of the need to display a strong character (P-A).

The participant noted that many police, regardless of rank, are reluctant to seek help due to the perceived need to project strength. Such attitudes present a barrier to engagement with EHW services, even when support is available and offered equitably. Grossman stated that police work continues to be stressful, particularly as a result of the perceptions of an ideal police officer that are maintained.⁵⁶ Some police officers are pressured into fitting into the description of what is seen as a good police officer, such as being physically fit, masculine and strong.⁵⁷ It is clear from the above comment that attending EHW sessions can be seen as a sign of weakness that dulls the appearance of an ideal police officer.

P-A recommended how the EHW services can be improved:

I would recommend the organisation to get more health workers, this will solve 99% of the problems I face alone, and I am not enough on my own due to realistic measures. The structure of the organisation also sometimes results in certain complexities as far as the hierarchy is concerned, because some people can be egocentric and refuse to be referred for help. I try to stick to the guidelines of the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA), so I cannot comment on anything outside my role. We keep the best interests of the clients/ patients, not those of the authorities (P-A).

The above comments highlight concerns with regards to insufficient EHW practitioners. The participants indicated that the EHW is not sufficiently staffed, and there is a shortage of EHW practitioners since they cater for five stations. The EHW staff complement comprised a single psychiatrist, a social worker and three chaplains responsible for five stations. The participants mentioned that they get to meet detectives in the morning, which indicates that sometimes they begin their duties around 6 am. Rajin also found the issue of insufficient EHW workers in a study conducted in Limpopo.⁵⁸ The study found that EHW practitioners were insufficient and had to serve six police stations with 1419 members. This indicates that detectives may not be adequately catered for due to insufficient EHW practitioners.

⁵⁴ Boshoff and Strydom, "Exploring Programmes to Support Police Officials Exposed to Trauma."

⁵⁵ Lourie Terblanche and Andre Van Wyk, "Critical Incidents and Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM)-an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) Perspective," *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 50, no. 1 (2014): 19-37.

⁵⁶ D. Grossman, *On Combat: The Psychology and Physiology of Deadly Conflict in War and in Peace*, 3rd ed. (Warrior Science Group, 2017).

⁵⁷ L. Westmarland, *Police Culture and Gender: Revisiting the "Masculine" Policing Environment* (Routledge, 2017).

⁵⁸ Rajin, "Employee Assistance Programme in the South African Police Service : A Case Study of Moroka Police Station."

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that the support structures in SAPS are designed to promote the psychological, emotional, and financial well-being of the murder detectives. Detectives remain the top priority in the employee health and wellness department. The findings indicate challenges in using support services based on job demands. The JD-R model provides a comprehensive framework to understand how job demands can hinder employee psychological well-being. The work demands evidenced in this study, as stipulated in the model, include high workload, time pressure, emotional demands and exposure to traumatic incidents. EHW practitioners identified identity and self-image as barriers to the use of support structures among detectives. Furthermore, the EHW practitioners mentioned that detectives who attend counselling services are hindered by the need to show a strong character associated with being a police officer. This was associated with the professional identity of police officers, such as resilience and strength, which led detectives to feel the need to align with perceived expectations. On the other hand, although the detectives indicated awareness of the existing counselling services and support structures, detectives do not find the support services as effective.

The factors mentioned were the lack of immediate support and the unavailability of EHW practitioners. For example, detectives mentioned that when they attend brutal murder crime scenes or if they are involved in shootings, they seek immediate trauma debriefing, but this does not often happen due to the turnaround from the EHW services. This was ascribed to the unavailability of the EHW practitioners. Consequently, EHW practitioners also raised the issue of the inadequate number of EHW practitioners and the high workload, which affects their productivity. The turnaround time was also associated with the revocation of trauma. Detectives' narratives indicate that the process of counselling is considered a process that revokes trauma. Specifically, detectives' point of concern was also the turnaround time of EHW practitioners and the gap between the date on which a traumatic incident occurred and the date given for counselling. Additionally, the findings further shed light on the detectives' intentions and attitudes toward seeking counselling services. The other factor that indicated the lack of confidence of the detectives in the SAPS counselling and support services was confidentiality. Detectives described fears around confidentiality as a deterrent that hinders them from seeking support services. The findings of Hofer and Shannon align with these sentiments, where officers expressed concerns around confidentiality, highlighting that their agencies would "know you're going [to counselling] because they're paying for that."⁵⁹ This indicates a need for the SAPS support services to clearly outline and define measures used to ensure confidentiality, as well as the limitations.

The participants recommended that the SAPS increase the number of EHW practitioners to improve and provide effective services. Dipela similarly points out that SAPS management should hire more EHW practitioners who can be located in police stations to support police officers who work far from the EHW offices.⁶⁰ Rajin's findings are consistent with Dipela's and the current study, suggesting that each police station should have its own station-based EHW practitioners to recognise police officers' problems and provide immediate assistance. During the interviews, the detectives questioned the competency of pastors in providing psychological assistance when they experience trauma. It was explained that in the previous year (2018), before the EHW office was moved to a nearby police station, Inanda had an EHW office consisting of a pastor without social worker or psychiatrist. The participants indicated that they did not understand the purpose of having consultations with a pastor when they have challenges that require trauma counselling. Detectives felt that pastors do not have relevant skills and that counselling is out of their area of expertise. Papazoglou and Tuttle emphasised the need for EHW practitioners to implement practical and relevant services.⁶¹ In the current study, detectives also recommended that EHW practitioners see the conditions under which detectives work to gain insight into the root causes of their stressors. It was envisaged that doing so would give the EHW practitioners a better understanding of the stressors haunting SAPS detectives. This supports the findings of Dipela that support

⁵⁹ Meret S Hofer and Shannon M Savell, "There Was No Plan in Place to Get Us Help': Strategies for Improving Mental Health Service Utilization among Law Enforcement," *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology* 36, no. 3 (2021): 543–57.

⁶⁰ Dipela and Sithole, "Under-Utilisation of Internal Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) Services by the South African Police Service in Lephalale, Limpopo Province."

⁶¹ Konstantinos Papazoglou and Brooke McQuerrey Tuttle, "Fighting Police Trauma: Practical Approaches to Addressing Psychological Needs of Officers," *Sage Open* 8, no. 3 (July 22, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244018794794>.

services should be more practical and focus on practical experiences to successfully implement effective support services.⁶² Likewise, Adewale and Anthonia argued that the EHW practitioner should be well-informed about the practical experiences of officers, and they should be well-equipped in terms of job-related competencies.⁶³

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthened EHW services: the study recommends an increase in the number of mental health care providers within SAPS and the establishment of EHW offices in precincts with high rates of crime. Strategically placing mental health practitioners in the police work environment can enhance the accessibility of support services.

Qualified mental health practitioners: the study findings revealed incidences where detectives seeking counselling services were assisted by chaplains; therefore, the study recommends the inclusion of trained mental health care professionals within the EHW. The chaplains play a valuable role in spiritual services; however, they may not possess the professional training required to address the trauma and psychological needs of murder detectives.

Regular workshops on stress management and coping mechanisms: the study recommends regular workshops for detectives dealing with murder cases to enhance coping mechanisms and foster a supportive community and open dialogue among officers.

Collaboration with external stakeholders: the study revealed high work demand from mental health care practitioners; therefore, a collaboration with external mental health organisations and academic institutions is recommended to allow practitioners with additional expertise, resources and skills to provide support to the EHW office through collaborative workshops, joint initiatives and outreach programmes.

Peer support programmes: the mental health care practitioners raised concerns with the workload and lack of time to visit police stations regularly. The study recommends the establishment of peer support groups within stations coordinated by EHW to foster a culture of solidarity among detectives.

Quantitative studies: The study recommends quantitative studies to explore the prevalence of occupational stress among murder detectives and to explore the correlation between variables. Moreover, longitudinal studies should be conducted on the state of the EHW services and the effects of stress on murder detectives over time.

CONCLUSION

This study was aimed at examining the counselling and support services provided to murder detectives. The case study design was successful in exploring and describing the subjective experience of detectives working with murder cases in a precinct ranked as one of the precincts with high rates of murder in South Africa. Effective counselling services and support structures are important in reducing the risk of occupational stress among SAPS detectives. The extant literature has demonstrated the extent of trauma experienced by officers working with murder cases. The current findings demonstrated the need for unique support services for detectives working on murder cases. Practical, instantaneous, and relevant support structures for murder detectives could help reduce the adoption of poor coping mechanisms and minimise the impact of occupational stress.

⁶² Dipela and Sithole, "Under-Utilisation of Internal Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) Services by the South African Police Service in Lephalale, Limpopo Province."

⁶³ Osibanjo Omotayo Adewale and Adeniji Adenike Anthonia, "Impact of Organizational Culture on Human Resource Practices: A Study of Selected Nigerian Private Universities," *Journal of Competitiveness* 5, no. 4 (2013): 115–33.

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