



# Exploring the Impacts of Everyday Policing on Police Officers' Psychological, Emotional, and Physical Wellbeing in Fiji

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## Abstract

Police work is often fraught with challenging and traumatic experiences, which can be managed well by some officers, while others may be significantly affected and require assistance. Even those who typically cope well may be adversely affected by a specific incident. Incorporating cultural considerations in the Fijian context, this study examines the impacts of everyday policing on officers' psychological, emotional, and physical wellbeing. An online survey was used to obtain 101 police officers' perceptions of challenging and stressful incidents, the impacts of such incidents on their wellbeing, and coping strategies used to deal with such incidents. The findings provide examples not only of everyday stressors, but also the traumatic incidents faced by police officers, which generate a range of negative impacts on their wellbeing. The article contributes to Pacific criminology and provides useful insights, with implications for policy and practice, to support and enhance the wellbeing of police officers.

**Keywords:** Police officers; policing; wellbeing; trauma; work-related stressors; self-care.

## Introduction

Policing is an inherently demanding profession, where officers navigate complex, high-stakes, and potentially traumatising situations every day. Police officers routinely face situations that demand split-second decision-making under challenging circumstances. The nature of policing introduces work-related stressors that can extend into multiple dimensions (e.g., psychological, emotional, and physical). The challenges of everyday policing can lead to the experience of heightened stress levels, trauma, and mental health concerns. Police officers respond differently to these situations: some officers typically manage these situations well, while others may have lasting impacts. However, even those who do typically cope well can be adversely affected by a specific incident or type of incident. Coping strategies, including those that are particularly important within Pacific cultural contexts, are therefore an important area for research.

This article reports the findings of a study that delved into police work and wellbeing in Fiji by undertaking an online survey of police officers. This study aimed to contribute empirical insights into the challenges that police officers are exposed to in their work, and their coping responses and self-care strategies to maintain psychological, emotional, and physical wellbeing. The article first discusses previous research on police officer wellbeing from around the world before considering police officer wellbeing initiatives in the Fijian context. It then outlines the method used for the research and reports the findings. Finally, the article discusses the implications of the findings, which offer valuable insights and practical implications for policy-makers, academics, students, and practitioners on future policies and interventions to enhance police officers' mental wellbeing and job satisfaction. This article contributes to scholarship on Pacific criminology (Faleolo & Forsyth, 2024) from the Fijian context.



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## Literature Review

### *Police Officer Wellbeing*

Research on police wellbeing has been undertaken in various countries around the world, highlighting the global concern for police officers about the impacts of their work. For example, researchers in the Netherlands highlighted the significant impacts of traumatic events on the mental health of police officers (van der Velden et al., 2013). A study in Switzerland found that the high demands of police work resulted in burnout and absenteeism among officers (Manzoni & Eisner, 2006). In Norway, researchers identified that high job demands affected officer wellbeing and contributed to chronic health issues (Richardson & Burke, 2007). A study in Poland examined the long-term effects of occupational stress on police officers, emphasising the negative impacts on quality of life and vitality (Basinska & Wiciak, 2013).

In the United Kingdom (UK), researchers explored the stress experienced by police officers and the resulting health problems (Jackman et al., 2020). Others examined organisational stressors in the UK, concluding that the major stressors for police officers included workload, lack of support, and workplace conflicts (Purba & Demou, 2019). These stressors can exacerbate the challenges faced by officers, leading to increased rates of burnout and absenteeism. Also in the UK, research by Bell and Eski (2016) highlighted that stigma around seeking mental health support within the police force prevented officers from addressing their mental health needs. Seeking support can be perceived by officers as a “career-destroying” action (Bell & Eski, 2016). This stigma discourages officers from addressing their mental health needs, leading to unaddressed stress and burnout. The reluctance to seek support not only affects the wellbeing of individual officers but can also impact the overall effectiveness and morale within the police force, potentially leading to a cycle of declining mental health and job performance.

In Australia, a study by Kerswell et al. (2019) explored the exposure of police officers in non-operational roles to traumatic events and the resulting psychological outcomes. Another Australian study found that peer support significantly influences psychological wellbeing among police officers (Rodwell et al., 2011). This reflected the findings of a Norwegian study, which stressed that peer support was a strong predictor of wellbeing among police officers (Vittersø & Nilsen, 2002).

Overall, these studies ranked policing as a highly stressful occupation. Everyday policing is recognised as a highly demanding job; it is linked to burnout, and results in absenteeism, chronic health issues, relationship problems, and diminished work quality (Manzoni & Eisner, 2006; Richardson & Burke, 2007). The potential exists for various health problems to emerge. These include mental health disorders stemming from the various critical incidents and potentially traumatic events that officers encounter daily (Jackman et al., 2020; van der Velden et al., 2013). Police stress can impact not only individual officers but also the overall effectiveness and wellbeing of police departments, making it difficult to maintain a healthy and stable workforce.

In the Fijian context, in relation to decisions on domestic violence arrests, Chand et al. (2024) noted that the ways that police officers approached their individual roles and their daily work was influenced by their traditional cultural beliefs and values. Other factors to consider in the Pacific context include balancing the intersection of traditional culture and Western methods (Watson et al., 2023) and being culturally responsive (Crichton-Hill, 2018).

### *Wellbeing in the Pacific Context*

Wellbeing in the Pacific encompasses the physical, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions and has a holistic worldview (Tuatahi, 2007). The Fijian notion of wellbeing is referred to as *bula taucoko* (holistic wellbeing), promoting the sense of interconnectedness of the individual as part of a bigger whole. The concepts of *solesolevaki* (community responsibility), *veisolisoli* (reciprocity), *veikawaitaki* (care), and *veinanumi* (concern) are examples of this holistic value at play. Ravuvu (1983) promoted the Fijian practices of *veirogorogoi* (listening), *yalomalua* (humility), and *veivukei* (helping) as the ideal Fijian way of working. When linked to policing, this promotes a strong foundation in the ideal Fijian conduct and creates resilience in officers.

The cultural notion of wellbeing varies significantly across different cultures and is deeply influenced by the values, beliefs, customs, and traditions specific to each community. For example, in i-Taukei (Indigenous Fijian) culture, wellbeing is closely tied to familial relations and respect for elders. The term used is "*nai tovo kei nai valavala vakavanua*," emphasising the communal approach to Fijian life. Wellbeing is viewed through the lens of physical, mental, and spiritual health. In this regard, it is a holistic approach. There is a strong reliance on cultural protocols, such as respecting traditional customs, engaging in communal activities like village clean-ups, and adhering to the advice of elders who are seen as guides due to their life experience.

### ***Fijian Context***

Fiji is an island nation situated in the South Pacific Ocean, about 2,000 kilometres north-east of New Zealand. The country consists of more than 330 islands, of which around 110 are permanently inhabited, along with over 500 smaller islets. Over 87% of Fiji's people live on its two largest islands, Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. The capital of Fiji, Suva, is situated on the island of Viti Levu. As of 2024, the estimated population of Fiji is around 900,000 people (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Recognised for its cultural diversity, the primary ethnic groups in Fiji are i-Taukei (Indigenous Fijians), who represent 56% of the population, and Indo-Fijians, who comprise about 37%. In addition to Rotumans (a Polynesian ethnic group native to the Fijian island of Rotuma), Europeans, Chinese, and Pacific Islanders, other ethnic groups also exist. English is the official language commonly spoken in Fiji, while *vosa vakaviti* (Indigenous Fijian language) and Hindi are also widely spoken.

Fiji has faced political instability, including several military coups since gaining independence in 1970, mainly due to tensions between the indigenous Fijian and Indo-Fijian communities. These tensions have often centred around land ownership and political representation. Despite these challenges, Fiji has made progress in achieving democratic governance and economic development. The economy relies on tourism, sugar exports, and remittances from Fijians living abroad. Fiji is known for its hospitality, rich cultural traditions, and stunning natural beauty, drawing visitors from around the world; however, there has been a steady rise in social issues.

### ***Policing Context and Wellbeing Initiatives in Fiji***

Recent data suggest that the Fiji Police Force has just over 4,500 police officers (Fiji Police Force, 2020). With a relatively small workforce, existing personnel may already face significant pressures in performing their duties effectively. The organisational stressors identified by Purba and Demou (2019)—including workload, lack of support, and workplace conflicts—are relevant in the Fijian policing context. The police force faces unique challenges due to its geographical dispersion across numerous islands and the cultural diversity within its communities. The stress from high workloads and limited resources can be magnified in such settings, where logistical difficulties and isolation from central support structures are common. Moreover, in some cases, internal conflicts and a perceived lack of organisational support can contribute significantly to stress, exacerbating feelings of isolation and professional dissatisfaction among officers.

Notably, the Acting Commissioner has discussed plans to increase to 7,000 police officers in the next five years to ensure adequate capacity for a growing population (Chaudhary, 2023). The plan to increase the number of officers recognises the need for more human resources to meet the growing challenges of policing in Fiji (Chaudhary, 2023). However, increasing numbers alone may not be sufficient. The quality of policing, officers' training, and their wellbeing are equally critical. As the force expands, there should be parallel investments in wellbeing programs, stress management, and support systems to ensure that both new and existing officers are not overburdened or stressed, due to the potential for burnout and reduced effectiveness.

Several wellbeing initiatives have taken place in Fiji in the last 10–15 years, often in partnership with other stakeholders and donors. For example, in 2013, the Fiji Police Force was part of a national level multi-sectoral collaboration to develop and adopt a *National Wellness Policy* (NWP). There were aspirations to develop a National Strategic Wellness Plan and a National Wellness Centre. These initiatives aligned with the World Health Organization's push for a healthier population worldwide. The NWP claimed that wellness in Fiji is not formally practised ... [and] "poorly understood." (Ministry of Health and Medical Services, 2015, p. 4).

During the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the Fiji Police Force with the collaboration of Medical Services Pacific, formalised a Memorandum of Agreement (MoA), to nurture a supportive environment, positivity, and prioritised officer wellbeing throughout the police force. A Mental Health Awareness Program run in 2022 by the Fiji Police Psychology Unit, in collaboration with Medical Services Pacific, and supported by the United Nations Development Programme to equip officers with essential knowledge and tools to effectively navigate mental health challenges in a holistic manner, helping them to manage burnout and post-traumatic stress they encounter in the workplace. A Nationwide Empowerment Programs in 2022 addressed issues impacting women within the organisation (Fiji Police Force, 2022).

Although these initiatives were positive step towards addressing the mental health needs of Fiji police officers, there have been limited coverage in a national document, such as, the *Fiji Police Force Annual Report August 2019–July 2020* of ongoing mental health initiatives. It mentions that 46 staff members accessed counselling in a 2-year period during 2018–2019 and 17 cases for 2019–2020. While it is encouraging that police officers and employees are accessing these services, the report does not directly capture any narrative or data on wellbeing programs that the police are undertaking or plan to carry out. In the context of the Fiji Police Force, any stigma surrounding seeking mental health support would only add to the already demanding nature of policing. Therefore, it is important to identify and address these organisational stressors, and any stigma associated

with seeking support, so that the Fiji Police Force can improve the overall wellbeing of its officers. This will facilitate more effective policing and a healthier working environment.

## Research Design and Methodology

This research was approved by the University of the South Pacific (USP) Research Committee (Reference: SoLaSS 19/23). Permission to conduct research with staff of the Fiji Police Force was provided by the Acting Commissioner of Police.

### Sampling and Participants

The study recruited 101 police officers from diverse ethnic backgrounds, ranks, and roles from all around Fiji. Participants' roles included police officers, investigators, traffic officers, communication officers, cluster chiefs (who manage a group of related work), and detectives, to list a few.

Participants for this study came from Eastern Division (8%), Central Division (11%), Western Division (16%), Northern Division (24%), Southern Division (38%), CID HQ (1%), and HQ Suva (4%). The majority of participants were i-Taukei (73%), followed by Fijian of Indian background (20%), and the remainder (8%) were from other ethnic backgrounds, as shown in Table 1. Over one-third (36%) of participants 41 years and over, followed by almost one-quarter (23%) aged 36–40 years, and one-fifth (20%) aged 26–30 years. Participants aged 21–25 years and 31–35 years each made up 11% of the sample. Participants' ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, and years of policing experience are outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1**

#### Demographic Data of Study Participants

Ethnicity	i-Taukei	Fijian Indian Descent	Fijian European Descent	Fijian Chinese Descent	Rotuman	Other	Total
	73%	20%	5%	1%	1%	1%	100%
Age	Below 20 yrs	21–25 yrs	26–30 yrs	31–35 yrs	36–40 yrs	41 yrs +	Total
	0%	11%	20%	11%	23%	36%	100%
Gender	Female	Male	Did not Disclose				Total
	41%	59%	1%				100%
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual	Did not Disclose	Asexual	Pan Sexual	LGBTQ+	Questioning/ unsure	Total
	71%	18%	7%	1%	3%	1%	100%
Years of Experience	Below 1 yr	1–5 yrs	6–20 yrs	21–30 yrs	31–40 yrs	41 yrs +	Total
	5%	22%	55%	7%	4%	2%	91% Not all responded

### ***Data Collection Procedure***

Participants were advised that this study was being conducted by researchers based at USP, with agreement by the Acting Commissioner of Police. Informed consent protocols were strictly followed, ensuring participants' voluntary and confidential participation were maintained.

The survey was piloted with several police officers to test the clarity and reliability of the questions. Following the pilot of the survey, it was sent to heads of operation, who distributed the survey link to their teams. Participants completed the questionnaire on a voluntary basis. They provided consent to take part in the study via a Google form prior to completing the questionnaire. It took around 30 minutes to complete the survey. The questions were asked in English, as it was the common language understood by participants; therefore, no translation work was done and no interpreter was required. However, this was a limitation in that, by responding in English, participants may have been less likely to report culturally specific concepts or needs.

### ***Survey Design***

The study used an online survey consisting of eight sections, which included a blend of closed-ended and open-ended questions. The questionnaire covered various considerations, such as the frequency, intensity, and sources of stress, as well as coping mechanisms, wellbeing strategies, emotional regulations, and seeking social support. The open-ended questions aimed to elicit officers' personal narratives and subjective experiences. After a section providing information for participants, participants responded to the following survey topics:

- Section 1 collected demographic data including the region in which the participant worked, gender (female, male, prefer not to disclose), sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, years' experience in policing, and role.
- Section 2 asked participants about their understandings of wellbeing in terms of personal, cultural, psychological, emotional, and physical wellbeing. It asked about participants' awareness of the wellbeing policy of the Fiji Police Force.
- Section 3 asked participants about their experiences of traumatic or emotional situations; specifically, whether they had experienced any traumatic incidents while on duty and, if so, the type of incident (abuse, verbal abuse, physical assault, domestic violence, sexual abuse, suicide, community violence, or other). The section asked about the frequency of such situations, the impact on the participant, and their willingness to seek help.
- Section 4 asked about the impacts of policing on participants in terms of burnout, compassion fatigue, health, changes in resilience, physical health, personal relationships, and stress, providing opportunities to elaborate or provide examples. The section then asked about different types of traumatic experiences while on duty (e.g., bullying, discrimination, assault) and the frequency of such occurrences. Participants were asked how they felt (e.g., anxious, unable to concentrate, fearful, angry, ashamed). Finally, they were asked if they sought help for the incident discussed.
- Section 5 asked participants about their awareness of supports offered to assist police officers with wellbeing, whether they had used such supports, and what more could be done to assist with wellbeing and job satisfaction for police officers.
- Section 6 asked about coping strategies that participants used to manage the demands of their work. It asked what else participants might like to try. Finally, it asked about self-care strategies.
- Section 7 asked about work-life balance and what could be done to enhance it.
- Section 8 asked about strategies to create a culture of wellbeing within the Fiji Police Force.

### ***Data Analysis***

Descriptive statistics were obtained to summarise the overall perceptions and coping strategies of the sample. Frequency data were obtained to understand the extent of participants' exposure to certain types of challenges. The open-ended questions allowed for free text data and the use of thematic analysis to identify recurring themes, patterns, and variations in officer experiences, coping mechanisms, and self-care strategies employed.

### ***Results and Discussion***

The findings are presented in the following sections: Understanding of wellbeing, Impacts of police work in general, Traumatic incidents—types and frequency, Impacts of traumatic incidents, Recent help seeking for traumatic incidents, and Coping, Self-care, and Wellbeing support.

### ***Understandings of Wellbeing***

Participants considered wellbeing as a multifaceted concept. Psychological wellbeing was described by officers as maintaining a positive mental state; job satisfaction; and an ability to manage stress, challenges, and pressures at work well. A participant claimed that it encourages productivity, promotes personal growth, and fosters a sense of fulfilment. Emotional wellbeing is concerned with maintaining positive moods, feelings, and thoughts, which directly impacts performance and productivity. When emotions are managed well, this is demonstrated with the ability to handle stress well and foster positive relationships with colleagues. Emotional wellbeing is linked to self-awareness, understanding, and maintaining a positive attitude, which helps foster teamwork and a constructive work atmosphere. Physical wellbeing centres on maintaining physical fitness and a healthy lifestyle. It includes engaging in regular physical activities to reduce stress and enhance energy for work. It involves proper nutrition, exercise, and adequate rest; boosts productivity; and maintains overall health.

Respondents saw true wellbeing as being healthy and happy in a range of domains. For example, one participant stated, "One must be spiritually, mentally, physically, and emotionally fit." Another emphasised, "Wellbeing is being happy and comfortable," while another described it as "[the] state of my happiness." A respondent added, "It is when you are content with life, and mentally care for myself." Similarly, others mentioned that wellbeing involved being "happy, humorous, grateful and financially stable," and ensuring, "my family is safe and happy, well-fed, in a home feeling secure, [and] supported."

Wellbeing was described as a holistic concept where being in harmony with oneself and one's community, and fulfilling spiritual duties, are essential to living a balanced life. Terms such as *bula vakayalo* (spiritual wellbeing) and *vinaka taucoko* (living a happy and comfortable life) were used to describe this interconnectedness. In addition, cultural practices, such as ceremonies, traditional protocols, and celebrations played a key role in promoting a sense of belonging and reinforcing wellbeing. These practices not only provided individuals with a sense of identity but also connected them to their larger community, allowing them to participate in fulfilling and meaningful cultural traditions. Economic stability and having the resources to meet daily needs, such as food, shelter, and land, were also mentioned as crucial elements of wellbeing. For some, this extended to being able to contribute to family and community events, which was seen as a marker of individual success and a stable family unit.

### ***Impacts of Police Work in General***

Police work had significant impacts on officers' personal lives, particularly affecting time with family and increasing stress levels. Nearly half (49%) of respondents struggled to balance work with family time, often due to extended hours and long field operations. Emotional challenges were also common, with some officers becoming emotionally distant and facing trust issues at home. As one officer noted, "The stress that I could lose my job at any time is so high, especially when I have a family depending on me." Several respondents acknowledged emotional hardships, noting that they had become emotionally hardened and found it challenging to open up at home. Trust issues, emotional distancing, and negative thoughts about long working hours contributed to family strain. The qualitative data also revealed instances of accusations of cheating by spouses, demonstrating the psychological toll that extended work hours take on officers and their families.

Two-thirds (66%) of respondents reported that policing negatively affected their personal relationships, while just over one-third (34%) said it did not. The demanding nature of police work had noticeable effects on officers' personal lives, affecting time with family and contributing to mood changes and increased stress. A substantial proportion of respondents (49%) highlighted the challenges faced in balancing work commitments with family time. Several participants commented about being, "Involved in arguments with family [members]."

A majority (68%) were aware of a police wellbeing policy, but nearly one-third (32%) were not, highlighting a need for better communication within the force. Stressors, such as job security, long hours, and the challenge of maintaining a work-life balance were frequently mentioned. One respondent expressed, "Creating a work-life balance is stressful at times," and another added, "Sometimes I am aggressive at home due to work pressure." Many officers expressed concerns about the demanding nature of their job, citing instances of extended hours, field operations lasting for months, and non-regular meal breaks. The pressure intensified during major operations, where officers experienced heightened stress levels to meet operational demands. A respondent said that "Being called for drill and lecture every week early morning, then doing your normal shift, has really increased the stress level." Another respondent said, "Juggling the roles of being a member of society whilst upholding the standards of my calling is challenging. We are not just police officers, there is life after the end of the shift." Other respondents added that they "Get sick and sometimes the mind is not at work."

Physical symptoms reported included fatigue, high blood pressure, insomnia, concentration problems, irritability, tiredness, anxiety, headaches, anger, worry, and migraine. These issues had led to some officers turning to unhealthy coping mechanisms, including increased smoking, alcohol consumption, and drinking kava.

Overall, these findings highlight the intricate relationship between policing demands and the quality of family life, emphasising the need to mitigate adverse effects on the officers' personal wellbeing and relationships. These findings reflect previous research, which showed that key stressors affecting this employee group include long working hours, heavy workload, police culture, organisational change (Purba & Demou, 2019), and high levels of work-related stress (Chitra & Karunanidhi, 2018).

### ***Traumatic Incidents—Types and Frequency***

Table 2 shows the most recent traumatic experiences that participants reported attending.

**Table 2**

*Types of Traumatic Experiences Reported by Fijian Police Officers (N = 101)*

Type of traumatic experiences	Number of responses	Percentage
Abuse	3	3%
Verbal abuse	22	21.8%
Physical assault	17	16.8%
Domestic violence	13	12.9%
Sexual abuse	9	8.9%
Suicidal ideation	15	14.9%
Community violence	5	5%
Other	9	8.9%
Not applicable	8	7.9%

For traumatic incidences, participants reported the following, 92% potentially traumatic incidents, 84% negative impact. 10% very frequent, while 29% often happened. The largest proportion was 45% for those that sometimes happened.

Additionally, participants reported the prevalence of a range of potentially traumatic incidents experienced in the workplace. These included bullying; verbal abuse; stand-over tactics; and discrimination, to name a few.

Respondents frequently encountered bullying, verbal abuse, and undermining, with the occurrence ranging from 1–2 times to up to 10 instances. Stand-over tactics, discrimination, and cases involving accidents and violent crimes were also notable, with multiple respondents experiencing these types of incidents between 3–5 and 5–10 times. On the other hand, more severe incidents, such as physical assault, sexual harassment, and racial/religious abuse were less frequently reported, with many indicating they never experienced these kinds of incidents. A small proportion of respondents noted systemic problems and unspecified trauma sources, though the frequency varied, with some reporting experiences of these traumatic incidents 1–2 times, while others never encountered them. Overall, they highlighted a range of duty-related traumatic incidents with varying frequencies affecting personnel in multiple areas of their professional duties.

Just under half of the respondents reported experiencing personal trauma once or twice (32%), while 2% reported that it occurred more than 10 times. Additionally, 8% stated trauma happened between 3–5 times, and 3% between 5–10 times. However, over half (55%) of participants reported never having experienced traumatic incidents themselves. Regarding police officers' awareness of trauma in their colleagues, 45% reported knowing someone who had been traumatised once or twice, 18% claimed it occurred between 3–5 times, 5% between 5–10 times, and 5% more than 10 times. Notably, 27% of respondents stated they had never known anyone personally affected by trauma.

### ***Impacts of Traumatic Incidents***

These traumatic experiences often led to officers having disturbed thoughts and disturbed sleep patterns. The weight of these experiences is evident in participants' statements like, “[it] gave me negative thoughts.” Another said, “[it] affected me the way I thought of life,” and a third respondent is quoted saying, “it made me think of how easy [it is] for anyone to lose their lives.” Additionally, there were instances where individuals reported feeling frightened, stressed, and even experiencing nightmares.

The toll on mental health was further underscored by feelings of depression, trauma, and a sense of despair. The impact of these experiences extended beyond the emotional realm to affect professional and personal aspects. One respondent stated, "It affected me emotionally and left me asking a lot of questions, and it's haunted me." Another contemplated, what if this happened to their family member? One respondent immediately thought of her two daughters.

Some respondents mentioned challenges in concentrating on work, negative influences on job performance, and feeling demoralised. Trust among colleagues came into question for some, leading to an altered work dynamic. Respondents acknowledged that their mindset often shifted away from work, and they found it challenging to focus on daily tasks. Personal relationships were affected, where individuals felt scared or stressed at home, impacting their ability to handle arguments and to connect with family and friends.

The data revealed participants' concerns about the broader societal implications of the incidents they witnessed. Issues like domestic violence, sexual abuse, and the wellbeing of children in the community deeply troubled them. One respondent said, "I keep thinking of the scene. It takes days to forget about the dead body." Another said, "Had nightmares and couldn't sleep properly." A respondent added, "I could not sleep for two days." These findings provide clear evidence that police officers often encounter emotionally challenging situations in the line of duty, leading to profound effects on their mental and emotional wellbeing.

Participants shared poignant insights into the emotional toll of their experiences. As one respondent said, "It really depressed me and I did not feel like going to work." Another claimed that it "Left me in a state of fear and severe pressure to perform my work or fear loss of work." Others said, "It traumatised me" and "It caused a lot of stress and anxiety," with one participant saying, "I can't perform my work well." These incidents have the power to resurface past traumas, as alluded to by a respondent: "It impacted me negatively because it brought back a lot of past-experiences [*sic*]." Another said, "Memories keep recalling it, fear of not satisfying customers, absenteeism, rejections, non-acceptance."

The data revealed diverse effects of burnout on police officers' physical and mental health. These encompassed symptoms such as lack of sleep, fatigue, eyesight problems, and various illnesses. Respondents reported experiencing conditions like gastritis, migraines, obesity, and high blood pressure, which they attributed to work-related stressors. Additionally, unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as excessive drinking of alcohol and kava and smoking, emerged as prevalent responses to burnout, contributing to deteriorating physical health. Burnout also impacted negatively on mental health and emotional wellbeing. Many respondents reported difficulties in coping with stress and finding it hard to motivate themselves for work. Reflecting the findings of prior research, burnout had various impacts (Manzoni & Eisner, 2006; Richardsen & Burke, 2007). For example, some officers expressed a sense of guilt, embarrassment, or inadequacy related to their perceived performance as police officers, further exacerbating their emotional distress. This may continue to affect them after the police force as acute stress has been linked to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other adverse health effects in retired officers (Violanti et al., 2017).

However, not all respondents reported negative impacts. For example, one respondent said, "No, it did not impact me." Another added, "It made me stronger to withstand any situation." Furthermore, a respondent claimed that it did not impact them personally, reporting a sense of being "strong and knowledgeable." Some respondents had no comments, and several said that they were happy at their work and looking forward to the challenges: "I enjoy my work.", "I thrive under pressure ... tend to look for high pressure environments to work in." It was notable that even those police officers who demonstrated a high level of resilience stated that there was a need for ongoing support, training, and strategies to maintain wellbeing in a demanding profession.

### ***Recent Help Seeking for Traumatic Incidents***

Regarding stigma associated with help seeking, the majority (60%) of participants said that it definitely existed; however, a substantial minority (31%) did not perceive a stigma and 9% were unsure. Almost two-thirds of respondents (66%) stated that the wellbeing of officers was never prioritised in the force, but just over one-third (34%) contested this view.

When asked about seeking necessary help, only 2% of respondents indicated seeking assistance more than 10 times, 1% between 5–10 times, 14% between 3–5 times, and 28% once or twice. Over half (55%) reported never seeking help for trauma-related issues. Regarding coping mechanisms and the internalisation of trauma, 30% of respondents admitted keeping traumatic experiences to themselves once or twice, while 11% noted doing so between 3–5 times. Furthermore, 8% reported keeping issues to themselves between 5–10 times, 11% more than 10 times, and 40% indicated never resorting to internalising traumatic events.

The presence of a stigma surrounding mental health support in the Fijian police force presents a critical issue. In a tight-knit, community-oriented culture like Fiji's, admitting to mental health challenges can be seen as a sign of weakness, potentially leading to fears of career repercussions or ostracism. Stigma can discourage officers from seeking necessary psychological support, leading to untreated stress and burnout. Such an environment not only affects the individual wellbeing of officers but also poses a broader risk to the operational effectiveness and morale of the police force, as it fosters a cycle where mental health needs are systematically ignored, and job performance declines.

### ***Coping, Self-care, and Wellbeing Support***

Regarding resilience, 77% reported having been significantly changed and around 16% declared no change. A small fraction (7%) said that there may be possible changes. Some changes included developing a "thick skin" to navigate challenges, with some attributing it to their years of service experience. Many officers found the profession challenging, wearing multiple hats during case attendance, leading to stress for some. Officers' observation of the presence of compassion fatigue included 64% claimed its presence, 23% did not, and 13% said maybe.

The way officers utilised coping strategies, included increased determination, changes in lifestyle, and adapting to challenges. Notably, some respondents reported becoming emotionally stronger, more vigilant, and security-minded through on-the-job experiences and training scenarios. The data suggested a shift in mindset and increased emotional resilience over time. Moreover, a number of officers noted positive changes to their ability to cope with life challenges, fostering maturity, empathy, and courage. While some officers experienced negative changes in their personal lives, such as spending less time with family or feeling stress at home due to workplace pressures, others expressed a commitment to prioritising work responsibilities. Several respondents acknowledged the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their stress levels and emotional wellbeing.

Fijian police officers maintained their wellbeing through culturally specific coping mechanisms, rooted in family, community, and traditional practices, to manage their stressors. For instance, in i-Taukei villages, community members work together to help each other with farming, cleaning, or tending to the sick, which fosters a sense of unity and collective responsibility for one another's wellbeing. One officer noted, "In the village, people work together to clean an individual's compound," while another emphasised the importance of family gatherings, saying, "Having regular family get-togethers ... to reduce stress." Fijian practices like *veivukei* (helping) and *duavata* (unity) ensure that no one is left behind. Elders' advice was also a major source of support, providing wisdom and emotional guidance. Maintaining cultural identity through ceremonies and traditional practices fostered respect, inclusion, and enhanced coping for some officers, when done in moderation. This included *sevusevu* (presentation of kava) to welcome someone and make connection, and sharing in the drinking of kava. Wellness activities, such as team bonding and regular exercise sessions, also provided stress relief and strengthened camaraderie. Family gatherings, regular interactions, and mutual support within the family were mentioned as vital practices.

Physical health and diet also emerged as a critical aspect of cultural wellbeing. Following Halal dietary guidelines, eating healthy, spiritually clean food, was an essential part of maintaining a good state of health for some. Similarly, physical activities like yoga were important for contributing to physical and mental balance. The notion of wellbeing also encompassed emotional and mental health, where a "sound mind" or "positive attitude" is essential for decision-making and coping with life challenges. Emotional stability was linked to healthy relationships within families and communities, contributing to a peaceful lifestyle and reducing stress. Some respondents referred to spiritual wellbeing, which in many cases was intertwined with physical and emotional health.

In sum, the respondents reported using the following coping strategies to manage the demands of their work:

- Socialising and spending time with family, friends, or colleagues, often during kava sessions, to relieve stress.
- Exercising, with activities ranging from regular gym workouts to participating in weekly competitions or other physical activities.
- Prayers and spirituality, including meditation and other spiritual practices.
- Leisure activities, including watching movies, listening to music, reading books, and spending time outdoors.
- Self-care and personal time, including proper diet, sufficient rest, and maintaining a healthy work-life balance.
- Seeking support from family, friends, and colleagues to discuss and manage their challenges, with some also mentioning the potential benefit of professional counselling.

The experiences of police officers in Fiji revealed a complex interplay of emotional resilience, adaptability, and the challenges of managing work-life balance. Key areas of change identified by the officers included emotional resilience and coping, professional identity and adaptation, personal life impact, growth and learning, and professional relationships and

communication. Officers expressed interest in various coping strategies, such as meditation, counselling, team bonding exercises, vacations, and professional development. They also highlighted the need for structured support, including trauma counselling and psychological services, to help manage stressors like burnout, vicarious trauma, and job-related stress.

## General Discussion

This study aimed to identify the types of traumatic incidents experienced by police officers in Fiji, the effects of such experiences, and strategies for coping, including culturally specific approaches. An online survey consisting of several parts obtained data that were analysed in terms of frequencies and themes. Overall, the findings suggest that police officers experience a range of challenging and traumatic incidents in their work in Fiji. Reflecting previous research (Bell & Eski, 2016; Berg et al., 2006), the findings also highlight a large proportion of participants perceive a stigma in relation to mental health help seeking. This finding reflects research from other countries, where seeking psychological help might be viewed as a sign of weakness, potentially impacting career progression. In a society where mental health issues can still be stigmatised, this perception would likely discourage officers from accessing the necessary support. Understanding and addressing this stigma is crucial for fostering a supportive environment where officers feel safe and encouraged to seek help without fear of career repercussions. Importantly, the findings also shed light on Fijian cultural practices associated with wellbeing, highlighting the importance of family and community connections in maintaining wellbeing. The implications of these key findings are discussed further below.

Achieving wellbeing in Pacific policing involves fostering a balanced approach that promotes holistic wellbeing of police officers and the communities they serve. Family gatherings, regular interactions, and mutual support within the family were mentioned as vital practices. Achieving wellbeing for police officers requires addressing challenges like high-stress environments, exposure to trauma, and maintaining strong police–community relationships. Culturally sensitive practices, particularly in diverse Pacific societies, are key, including incorporating indigenous values like respect, communal harmony, and *talanoa* (open dialogue or discussion). Wellbeing in this context also means ensuring officers receive proper support and training to handle conflict, mental health challenges, and work-life balance, all while improving trust and accountability within the community. We can conclude that a Fijian cultural notion of wellbeing encompasses physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions. These aspects are interdependent and often expressed through community participation, adherence to cultural norms, respect for elders, and practices that promote both individual and collective health. While the specifics may differ across cultures, the underlying principle of holistic wellbeing—balancing personal, communal, and spiritual life—remains a universal theme.

The findings suggest that stress management strategies among officers are both individual and communal, with an emphasis on physical health and exercise as key coping methods. While the findings suggest a strong foundation of personal and communal coping strategies, there is an opportunity for the Fiji Police Force to introduce mental health programs and workshops that provide more comprehensive support. Themes emerging from the feedback include the importance of team bonding, work-life balance, mental health support, training, communication, leadership, and improved resources and infrastructure. Many respondents advocated for access to professional counsellors, including psychologists and spiritual leaders, to address the emotional toll of policing. Suggestions for activities like exercise, yoga, and team building emphasise the need for a holistic approach to wellbeing, which can also foster peer support and camaraderie in the high-pressure environment of policing.

However, the issue of stigma may be compounded further in Fiji and around the Pacific through the practice of honouring hierarchical structure. This can be seen in the *turaga* (chiefly) system or *matai* (chief) in Samoa, where the chief is seen as the supreme authority of the *vanua* (land), and no one dares to challenge their authority. Historically, those that opposed were silenced by the warclub or shamed. Commoners were expected to obey and be subordinate to their leader. According to Ratubulewa (2012), this is where the culture of silence stemmed from in Fiji, which later developed into respect, tolerance, service and honour. Therefore, it is unsurprising that some Fijian police officers did not seek help or stayed silent when faced with traumatic experiences. Officers in Fiji often work long hours without protest, which may be the same with other Pacific nations, as they are motivated by cultural and spiritual values and professional ideals. These officers tend to take on the most challenging tasks without hesitation this is done out of a deep respect for maintaining their role and the cultural ideals of respect, honour, and dedication, not for personal gain or recognition. The culture of silence, promoted by Nayacakalou (1978), may also influence Pacific policing practice. This cultural value of not challenging leadership or authority is not limited to developing Pacific nations, extending to Pacific officers in developed countries like Australia, New Zealand, and Hawaii. The concepts of service, altruism, and dedication are integral to Pacific peoples' approach to law enforcement.

A critical issue highlighted in this study is the lack of awareness and implementation of existing wellbeing policies, suggesting a communication gap that needs to be addressed. Ensuring officers are aware of and feel comfortable accessing support services

without fear of stigma is essential for enhancing their overall wellbeing. Despite the introduction of the *National Wellness Policy* (Ministry of Health and Medical Services, 2015), knowledge and the implementation of wellness practices remains limited. Although several initiatives have been implemented by the Fiji Police Force, it seems that more needs to be done. More direct availability of formal mental health support would be beneficial. Police organisations must provide wellbeing support to maintain officers' physical, emotional, and social wellbeing. While the findings of the study suggest that there are individual efforts to manage wellbeing within the Fiji Police Force, there is a need for more structured and organisational-level interventions.

The findings of the study suggest that, even though frameworks and policies may exist, their impact is contingent upon the level of awareness and practical application among officers. For the Fiji Police Force, targeted education and training programs are needed that can demystify wellness concepts and embed them into daily policing routines. By doing so, officers are more likely to adopt these practices, leading to improved psychological, emotional, and physical health. This study's participants suggested interest among Fijian police officers in team bonding, social activities, and community engagement, reflecting a cultural value placed on relationships and support networks. Potential Fiji Police Force initiatives may include mental health programs, training on stress management, peer support programs, crisis intervention training, regular psychological evaluations, work-life balance initiatives, wellness programs, and critical incident debriefings.

Modern police organisations throughout the Pacific region are largely shaped by Western institutional influences (Watson et al., 2023). Some practices are appropriate to the Fijian context and others less so. Given the close-knit nature of Fijian society, based around support, respect, reciprocity (Ravuvu, 1983), family, and relationships (Crichton-Hill, 2018), a culture of care and peer support within the police force is needed. Support from peers has been identified as a critical factor in promoting psychological wellbeing among police officers (Rodwell et al., 2011; Vittersø & Nilsen, 2002). In Fiji, fostering a supportive peer network could be a crucial strategy for mitigating the effects of organisational stressors and reducing the stigma associated with seeking help. Building a culture of mutual support and open communication could enhance resilience among officers, helping to counteract the negative impacts of stress and trauma exposure. By prioritising peer support and destigmatising mental health care, the Fijian police force can improve both the wellbeing of its officers and its overall operational effectiveness.

Some of the ways in which the Fiji Police Force has made efforts to strengthen support structures include the implementation of force chaplains, psychologists, and counsellors. This highlights the commitment to addressing psychological and emotional wellbeing issues within the force. Providing financial assistance and promoting social wellbeing are also important roles for welfare schemes and community support networks, such as the Northern Division Women's Network and the Fiji Police Credit Union. To ensure officers maintain a certain level of physical fitness, police organisations have implemented fitness policies, such as the Required Fitness Level (RFL) Policy and other wellness programs. As a result of these initiatives, officers have access to physical activities and team bonding exercises, which promote overall health and camaraderie among colleagues. Additionally, officers are able to access medical services provided by force medical officers and welfare support departments, ensuring that they receive the medical care they require. However, it is important that the initiatives being employed by the Fiji Police Force are captured in its annual report and presented to all employees and the public. The nation can then understand the force's focus on officer wellbeing through planned or implemented measures.

## Conclusion

The Fiji Police Force has made strides in promoting wellbeing initiatives and providing counselling support over the last 20 years. However, this study highlighted that the challenges faced by police officers in their daily roles remain a significant issue. Although some officers reported resilience and the ability to manage the demands of policing, many others experienced stress, burnout, and heavy workloads that negatively affected their psychological, emotional, and physical wellbeing. Traumatic incidents have far-reaching impacts on the health of officers. The Fijian cultural value of silence, including the unchallenged acceptance of orders, may exacerbate these issues and hinder the development of healthier policing practices. The unique challenges of policing in Fiji require targeted interventions that address the holistic wellbeing of officers. Culturally responsive policing is a crucial component of these interventions, as it emphasises the importance of integrating the Fijian cultural practice of *bula vakavanua* (Fijian way of life) and other Fijian cultural values and communal service-oriented practices into law enforcement practices. This fosters trust and cooperation within the community. Future research, including more in-depth qualitative studies and longitudinal approaches, is needed to further explore these dynamics and to assess the effectiveness of wellbeing initiatives and culturally informed practices in the Fijian policing context.

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