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# Dog and Shield: The Buffering Effect K-9s Have on Police Officer Strain

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**Dog and Shield:  
The Buffering Effect K-9s have on Police Officer Strain**

Honors Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Bachelor of Criminal Justice

In the College of Health and Human Services  
at Salem State University

By  
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## Abstract

According to General Strain Theory, suicide, drug/alcohol abuse and violence are the result of maladaptive coping strategies in response to strain (Agnew, 1992). This study looks at categories of Police Officer stress in congruence with Agnew's categories of strain: failure to achieve positively valued goals, the presence of noxious situations or events, and the removal of positively valued stimuli (Agnew, 1992; Menard & Arter, 2013). It then measures the consequences of strain, both emotional and physical, in the officers involved in the study, and compares the results with the officers' access to both emotional and instrumental support systems. The police "code of silence" subculture regarding mental health issues often leaves those officers who are struggling on the job with no one or nothing to turn to for help. Consequently, alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence, on-the-job violence and suicide are prevalent issues among law enforcement officers. This study will compare the buffering effect on stress and strain that the presence of a dog, both on and off the job, has on law enforcement officers. Dogs may serve as an intervening variable in the relationship between strain and negative behaviors. It is expected that having a permanent K-9 unit in each department would have a positive effect on police officer health and well-being by providing social and emotional support. Therefore, the use of K-9 units as a stress management tool as well as a law enforcement tool will also be discussed.

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## Introduction to General Strain Theory

Law enforcement is a risky and dangerous profession, yet the threat of violence is more often self-inflicted than at the hands of others. According to the National Study of Police Suicides (NSOPS), in 2008 there were 141 police suicides; two times the number of officers killed by felons. In 2010, the suicide rate among the general public was 11/100,000, compared to the police rate of 17/100,000, which is closely followed by the military rate of 20/100,000 (Badge of Life FAQs, 2013). So why are there more suicides among police than the general population?

According to Strain Theory, suicide is often the result of maladaptive coping strategies (Akers & Sellers, 2013). Merton (1938) proposed that strain manifests when an individual is blocked or unable to achieve culturally defined goals through legitimate means. He outlines five potential adaptations, or coping strategies used in response to this strain:

**Adaptation I:** Conformity to both culturally accepted goals and means.

**Adaptation II:** Innovation of the means by which to obtain the culturally accepted goals.

**Adaption III:** Ritualism, wherein cultural goals are deemed unattainable, but the means are practiced regardless.

**Adaptation IV:** Retreatism from both the cultural goals and means

**Adaptation V:** Rebellion from both the goals and means in an attempt to institutionalize new ways in which to achieve new goals.

Conformity is the most common adaptation, and categorizes nearly all law abiding citizens. In contrast, the fourth form of adaptation is Retreatism. The individual, frustrated by constant failure, rejects both the institutionalized means to achieve the goal, as well as the goal itself (Merton, 1938). Merton identified outcasts, alcoholics and drug addicts in this category.

Unfortunately, Merton focuses entirely on the acquisition of normative values (wealth and status) and ignores all other forms of strain that could cause deviancy (anomalous behavior) (Mazerolle, Burton Jr., Cullen, T., & Payne, 2000). Agnew's (1992) revised General Strain Theory identifies three situations that cause strain: 1) failure to achieve positively valued goals, 2) the removal of positively valued stimuli, and 3) the presence of noxious situations or events (Akers & Sellers, 2013) (Mazerolle, Burton Jr., Cullen, T., & Payne, 2000) (Menard & Arter, 2013). Previous interrelated research identifies four types of police officer stress apposite to Agnew's three categories of strain. They are: *stressors internal to the agency*, *stressors external to the agency*, *stressors inherent to the nature of police work* and *personal stressors* (Swatt, 2007).

### Failure to Achieve Positively Valued Goals:

The first source of strain identified by Agnew is the failure to achieve positively valued goals. In the police culture, this would include stressors *internal to the agency*, such as low pay and the inability to advance their career (Kaufmann, 1989) (Swatt, 2007). This jeopardizes goals of success, wealth and status.

Other times goals are *external to the agency*, such as positive community relations. However, the police and the community they serve are not always on good terms (Swatt, 2007). Anti-police sentiments in the community make law enforcement feel hated and unappreciated (Menard & Arter, 2013). Yet, even after the community has relegated them, they continue to serve and protect.

In addition to the community's adversity, there is often frustration with the system when it fails them (Kaufmann, 1989) (Swatt, 2007). Their goal is to keep the community safe. However, they can only eliminate the threat initially through arrest and detainment. They eventually come to realize that they are having little effect on crime (Patterson, 1992). The system: courts, probation and parole, continuously release dan-

gerous offenders back into the community. Many times, the lawyers and other justice professionals unfairly blame the officers for their own incompetence (Kaufmann, 1989).

### Removal of Positively Valued Stimuli

Agnew's second situation that results in strain is the removal or absence of positively valued stimuli. In the police culture, this can be seen in stressors *external to the agency* and as *personal stressors* (Swatt, 2007).

Unfair and unwarranted treatment from the community and co-professionals, especially when respect was shown before, is an example of *external stressors* that reflect the absence or removal of positively valued stimuli (Swatt, 2007). Strain may occur when an officer is not accepted into the police subculture. The police role is an important aspect of being an officer. The police culture, both formal and informal, becomes an expected part of their character. However, not fitting-in or being excluded from this subculture causes strain (Menard & Arter, 2013) (Swatt, 2007).

The same role strain can occur in their personal lives as well. The inability to adapt to their role as a spouse, or parent at home can ruin relationships and break apart families (Parker II, 2012) (Violanti, 1997). Personal stressors, as well as stressors inherent to police work can cause a lot of strain in an officer's life.

### The Presence of Noxious Situations or Events

The presence of noxious situations and events are *inherent to the nature of police work* (Janik & Kravitz, 1994) (Swatt, 2007). Police officers experience things that would scar many ordinary citizens. They are the first responders to murders, sexual assaults, child abuse and drug overdoses. Sometimes they are forced to make life and death decisions in these situations. Police officers are the ones who have to pull the trigger when eliminating a threat; and, they are the ones who have to choose who receives their life-saving attention in serious accidents, know-

ing full well that the other person will probably die without it. These images never really go away. Police officers often report PTSD symptoms during and after their careers (Menard & Arter, 2013).

Officers also have little time to recover from these traumatic incidents. They work long hours and often pull overtime, leaving them with little time to spend with their family and friends. Between duty shifts and copious amounts of paperwork, their relationships become strained and sometimes filled with resentment. Many times officers have trouble adapting to home-life and bring their work mannerism home. Other times they attempt to shield their loved ones from the horrors of their job. This *personal* stress derived from broken lines of communication increases strain (Janik & Kravitz, 1994) (Menard & Arter, 2013) (Parker II, 2012) (Swatt, 2007) (Violanti, 1997).

### Responses to Strain

Unfortunately, the police culture not only predisposes officers to stressors consistent to Agnew's sources of strain, but the culture also avoids addressing the emotional (depression, avoidance, withdrawal), psychological (neurosis, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), and physical (heart disease, stroke, ulcers, sexual dysfunction) consequences of strain (Menard & Arter, 2013). Individuals attempt to cope with these types of strain either emotionally, cognitively, or behaviorally (Ernst, 2014) (Swatt, 2007). Those who are unable to cope appropriately are more likely to engage in deviancy (Akers & Sellers, 2013).

Officers address their emotional response to strain (usually frustration and anger) by either externalizing or internalizing their feelings (Ganem, 2010). When externalizing such emotions, they are likely to become physically and verbally aggressive towards others. However, when trying to avoid negative affectations, they internalize emotion (Ganem, 2010) (Swatt, 2007). Regrettably, internalization often mani-

fest into drug and/or alcohol abuse, and sometimes even suicide.

This aggression towards others, both on and off the job, reflects Merton's (1938) Innovative response; although, the response is to Agnew's (1992) categories of strain rather than Merton's ideal goals. Likewise, the path of avoidance and internalization is pertinent to Merton's Retreatist adaptation, but in congruence with Agnew's categories of strain.

The deviant behaviors: violence, alcohol/drug use or abuse, and suicide, are actually the coping mechanisms that are used to alleviate the emotional response (anger, frustration, and fear) to the strain that they experience (Ganem, 2010).

### Police Attitudes and Social Support

Social support has been considered the most important factor in dealing with strain in this milieu (Parker II, 2012) (Stephens, Long, & Miller, 1997). Research suggests that *emotional support* is more important than *instrumental support*. Emotional support is offered when someone lets another person know that they care for them, whereas instrumental support refers to the direct support a person gives through acts such as lending money or providing someone with a place to stay. Research also supports the idea that "social support" has the potential to "buffer," "condition," or "moderate" the relationship between occupational stressors and strains, and the use of maladaptive coping strategies discussed above (Janik & Kravitz, 1994) (Kaufmann, 1989) (Menard & Arter, 2013).

Unfortunately, the police culture perpetuates maladaptive coping strategies by minimizing the attraction and availability of social support (Kaufmann, 1989). During their time at the Academy, they are socialized into the propagandized police role. It becomes an integral part of their selves, and they cannot turn it off (Violanti, 1997). If you know anyone who is or was a police officer, just watch where they sit when they go into a restaurant. They will never sit with

their back to the door because they were trained to always be hyper-vigilant (Violanti, 1997).

The police academy also attempts to instill a superhuman emotional strength in its officers. They think of their emotional response to strain as character flaw, discouraging them from sharing how they feel with others (especially other officers) because they feel that they are alone (Stephens, Long, & Miller, 1997) (Swatt, 2007) (Violanti, 1997). This is unfortunate in that many studies including Kauffman (1989) found that occupational support is the most important form of emotional support for police officers.

The police culture promotes traditionally masculine ideals of stoicism, autonomy, achievement, and aggression (Stephens, Long, & Miller, 1997) (Violanti, 1997). Embracing these ideals make them less likely to seek social support than their female counterparts. Research shows that the gender identity shapes feeling rules, and the expression of emotions differ because it allow a person to acquire or maintain statuses of masculinity or femininity (Ganem, 2010) (Violanti, 1997). This may be a notable finding because, as stated before, strain results in an emotional response. The deviancy (aggression towards others, alcohol/drug abuse, and suicide) is used as an attempt to alleviate those emotions (Ganem, 2010). Male officers have a higher rate of suicide (91%) than female officers (Badge of Life FAQs, 2013), and 48% of males drink alcohol excessively, compared to 40% of female officers (Swatt, 2007). Alcohol use has been identified not only as one of the major maladaptive coping strategies that police officers use to help relieve stress, but one that is very much accepted by the police culture (Swatt, 2007). Therefore, males are more likely to employ maladaptive coping strategies in their attempt to fulfill the androcentric police role. Females are traditionally more empathetic, caring and submissive (Ganem, 2010), and for that reason, may be more likely to cope with strain they experience on the job by enlisting the support of their family, friends, councilors, etc...

There has been a lot of research exploring the effects of social support on strain, both in law enforcement and on veterans suffering from PTSD. Christine Stephens and Nigel Long's study *The Impact of Trauma and Social Support on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Study of New Zealand Police Officers* (1997) looks at the similarities between the responses of police officers and war veterans to strain. Emotional social support from the officers' supervisors and coworkers (occupational support) may be more important than other types of social support because the people who they are talking to have experienced similar incidents and are easier to relate to. Stephens and Long cite studies of Vietnam Vets in the U.S. that suggest that talking about their experiences to other veterans helped the recovery process. Due to similarities between vets and officers in that they both experience traumatic incidences; the same results would be expected.

However, the sample of Australian officers in the study did not use emotional social support (Stephens, Long, & Miller, 1997). They instead used avoidance based coping strategies mentioned previously (SEE (Merton) p. 2).

### **The Use of Therapy Dogs as Social Support**

Police officers report many of the same strain related responses as veterans suffering from PTSD (Stephens, Long, & Miller, 1997). The high cost of medications and other treatments have lead many veterans, to seek alternative therapies. One such therapy is the use of therapy dogs. Although there are only a few completed studies on the effects dogs have on those with PTSD, there are numerous studies done in the mental health field that look at the positive benefits of having a pet, especially a dog, on those with psychological disabilities, such as depression, anxiety or stress (Ernst, 2014) (Hart, Zasloff, Bryson, & Christensen, 2000) (Marie & Cline, 2010). Veterans said their dogs had the same or greater positive effect as

medications. The relief veterans experienced was similar to the relief the mental health patients had in many of those studies. In concurrence with this idea, many schools have begun to bring dogs to campus to alleviate stress and anxiety before finals (Ernst, 2014).

Studies based on canine companionship focus on the social support dogs provide their owners. The idea is that dogs provide the intimate confiding relationship, which is the most important form for social support at an emotional level. The role of dog ownership can sometimes be as meaningful as other roles, such as parenting, especially if the individual feels isolated (Marie & Cline, 2010). Also, dogs may facilitate their owner's social network of human contacts, which in turn, provides support. Physical activity has also been shown to decrease depression, and is an inadvertent element of dog ownership (Ernst, 2014) (Hart, Zasloff, Bryson, & Christensen, 2000) (Marie & Cline, 2010).

### **History of Animal Assisted Therapy**

For over 15,000 years, dogs have remained a constant companion, friend and protector of humans (Lobell & Powell, 2010). Even while other animals (most notably cats) have changed in their purpose and position drastically over time, dogs have been a fixture in human lives (Mark, 2014). Much research has been conducted regarding the human and dog interactions over the course of history, and it is perhaps due in part to the obvious benefits companion animals provide their owners, as to why they have remained alongside humans for so long.

The first incident of the therapeutic benefits of dogs was recorded in Florence Nightingale's *Notes on Nursing*. In the 1800's, she noticed that small animals helped patients to recover. Dogs used to service those with disabilities first began in 1920's, when World War I veterans who lost their sight began using seeing-eye dogs. In 1929, a group in America became the first to breed, raise and train guide dogs for the blind veterans. But like working dogs, service

dogs have a particular purpose or function, and the legal definition of a service dog does not include dogs used for emotional support, well-being or comfort. Dogs and other animals that provide social support for their human companion are called therapy dogs (Ernst, 2014).

The first therapy dog was four pound Yorkshire terrier named Smokey. She was found in an abandoned foxhole in New Guinea in 1944, and sold to an American Soldier named Corporal William Wynne of Ohio for a mere \$6.44. During the war, Smokey survived 150 air raids, and a typhoon, as well as helped to build the Lingayen Gulf air base by running a telegraph line 70 feet through a pipe in minutes, a feat that would have taken soldiers days to accomplish. However, Smokey's contributions did not stop there. When Wynne was later hospitalized with Jungle Fever, the loyal terrier remained by his side. Not only did Smokey's presence cheer up Corporal Wynne, but she also increased the morale of many other patients in the hospital. Her ability to entertain and comfort the patients caught the eye of Dr. Charles Mayo (later founded the Mayo Clinic) who allowed the dog to go on rounds with the nurses. She continued to provide therapeutic services for wounded soldiers for another 12 years (History of Smokey - The First Therapy Dog, 2013).

Around the same time, Sigmund Freud used his dog Jofi to assess the anxiety levels of his patients. When Jofi was near Freud's patient, he noticed that they were calm. When Jofi stayed on the other side of the room, the patients seemed tense and anxious. He believed that Jofi could sense their anxiety levels. He then noticed that his patients seemed more comfortable talking to the dog, and they eventually graduated to talking to Freud, himself (Ernst, 2014).

However, it is the author of *Pet-Oriented Child Psychology*, Boris Levinson, who is known as the "Father of Animal-Assisted Therapy." In the 1960's, the psychotherapist discovered that non-verbal children would communicate with his dog, Jingles, during their psychotherapy sessions. He presented his findings to the

American Psychological Association, but wasn't taken seriously until Freud's similar findings were later discovered (Ernst, 2014).

The therapeutic benefits of animals are becoming increasingly recognized in clinical areas. Today, Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) canine teams are used in many different facilities for the purposes of supporting and/or improving patients social, emotional, physical and cognitive functioning. Cardiovascular, psychological, and cognitive fields have shown the most recognizable benefits from AAT (Ernst, 2014). In relation to the adverse effects of police strain, the psychological benefits are the most important.

Surveys find that almost 50% of psychiatrists and psychologists have suggested a pet for their patients (Ernst, 2014). Animal interactions, especially dogs, promote positive emotions (Ernst, 2014) (Hart, Zasloff, Bryson, & Christensen, 2000) (Marie & Cline, 2010). AAT effectively improves social communication skills, eases anxiety, and improves moods and empathetic relatability. Confidence is boosted and feelings of loneliness, depression, anger, frustration, fear, and insecurity are reduced significantly (Ernst, 2014).

## **Benefits of Police Officer-K-9 Interactions**

Police officers suffering from strain would benefit from the social support AAT and dog ownership provides. Dog companionship provides 1) role enhancement, 2) social support, and 3) physical activity, all of which buffer the adverse effects of strain.

### **Role Enhancement**

As mentioned before, law enforcement is a very demanding job. Officers sometimes have a difficult time transitioning from their role at work to their role at home. They tend to become tough and aggressive with their family. The police officer role cannot be turned off and makes emotional involvement with their family nearly impossible (Janik & Kravitz, 1994) (Parker II,

2012) (Patterson, 1992). Violanti (1997) suggests that the high rate of police suicide is a consequence of this role strain.

In addition to an emotionally undeveloped family relationship, an officer's long, constantly changing shifts prevent them from spending valued time with their family (Janik & Kravitz, 1994) (Parker II, 2012) (Swatt, 2007) (Violanti, 1997). Many times a police officer's spouse feels locked out of their relationship, and leads the lifestyle of a "married single." Because the officer cannot participate in "normal" family activities, the social obligations, and tasks such as child care, are left to the responsibility of the spouse (Janik & Kravitz, 1994). With communication shut down, divorce rates as high as 75% are often reported (Janik & Kravitz, 1994). After losing their family and spouse as a reliable source of social support, officers become more susceptible to the negative consequences of strain.

A dog provides an alternative role for the officer as compensation for their perceived failure as a good parent or spouse. Research finds that people who have multiple roles can rely on other relationships more heavily than the ones that are failing. Not only does the dog provide a rewarding role comparable to the one that they cannot fulfill (such as parenthood), but it also provides a source of social support that is lost with their family (Marie & Cline, 2010).

### Social Support

Social support has been shown to buffer the effects of strain by providing an emotional outlet (Ernst, 2014) (Marie & Cline, 2010). As previously demonstrated in the case of Vietnam veterans, being able to talk about traumatic experiences can help the officer to recover from the effects of PTSD and other strain (Stephens, Long, & Miller, 1997). Because we treat dogs like people, we can confide in them, and in return they provide the same companionship, security, and unconditional love and affection as intimate human relationships. They also provide

invaluable emotional support (Marie & Cline, 2010). Studies have shown that the mere presence of a dog, as well as their comforting touch can lower blood pressure, ease anxiety, and promote positive emotions like happiness and confidence (Ernst, 2014).

### Safety

The perception of safety is especially important for officers (Hart, Zasloff, Bryson, & Christensen, 2000). A dog at home can protect their family when they are not around, and a dog at work (K-9 unit) can protect them while on duty. This would have a significant effect on the stressors inherent to the nature of police work discussed.

Dogs were first used to protect law enforcement in the nineteenth century. At this time, constables were armed with only a night stick and injuries and fatalities became a great concern. Criminals were armed with knives and guns, and the constables were outmatched. Then, in 1896 Dr. Ham Gross had an ingenious idea to minimize this disadvantage (Anderson, n.d.). Gross proposed teaming the night-shift patrol with canine partners, referring to them as the "ideal, ever-watchful companions of the constable in his arduous official rounds, gifted with senses far more acute than those of his master's." (Anderson, n.d.) The idea was quickly adopted by many, including Van Wesenmael, the Police Chief of Ghent, Belgium, who added 70 "night-dogs" to his police force in 1899. Amazingly, arrest rates went up and police casualties decreased significantly. Many European cities were inspired by these results, and soon thousands of dogs were being trained and certified to work alongside the force (Anderson, n.d.).

However, canine units were not established in the United States until 1907 in South Orange, New Jersey and New York City Police Departments. Since then, 3,250 police K-9 programs with over 7,000 teams are now in service (K-9 Unit History, 2012). Today, these dogs are used for a variety of purposes such as patrol and detection.

One of the most appreciated aspects of police K-9s is their ability to provide a source of less-than-lethal force. They also have a better chance of finding their target than a bullet. German Shepherds (the most popular K-9 breed) are large and their sharp teeth certainly provide deterrence against would-be criminals (K-9 Handler Team, 2015) (Hart, Zasloff, Bryson, & Christensen, 2000, p. 192). In the past, police dogs were trained to be so vicious that they had to be muzzled at all times except when chasing or attacking a suspect (Anderson, n.d.). This deterrence effect allows for officers to deal with situations more efficiently, and minimizes the need for making life or death decisions while on the job. Furthermore, dogs are much more efficient in searches and promote positive community relationships (Anderson, n.d.) (Hart, Zasloff, Bryson, & Christensen, 2000).

### *Community Relations*

Dogs provide positive social opportunities for law enforcement, and help to strengthen its relationship with the community. Since a positive community relationship is important to, and often a source of stress for officers (external) (Swatt, 2007), this is a significant benefit of having K-9s permanently on the force. Studies on public perceptions have found that U.S. National Park Service rangers who use dogs seem to be more approachable and friendly (Hart, Zasloff, Bryson, & Christensen, 2000). The community sees the increase in the department's efficiency, which, in turn, enhances their trust and lessens anti-police sentiments (Anderson, n.d.).

### *Efficiency and Time Management*

The most noticeable benefit police dogs provide for their department, and in turn their community, is their unmatched search and detection skills (Anderson, n.d.). They are able to detect suspects, missing persons, narcotics, bombs, and other substances faster and more successfully than their human counterparts. Building searches are completed seven times faster by a

single dog than by a team of four officers, as well as being 44% more successful (93% K-9 vs 59% human success rate) (Anderson, n.d.). In addition, their "superior olfactory-skills" (Hart, Zasloff, Bryson, & Christensen, 2000) were responsible for their departments being 33% more effective in narcotic arrests (and convictions) than departments without K-9s (Anderson, n.d.).

The ability of K-9s to cut the amount of time spent, and increase the success rate of numerous types of police work allows officers the opportunity to better spend their time (Anderson, n.d.). They can focus on other aspects of policing that are otherwise neglected, as well as spend more time strengthening their relationships with family and friends (a major source of personal stress) (Janik & Kravitz, 1994) (Menard & Arter, 2013) (Parker II, 2012) (Swatt, 2007) (Violanti, 1997).

### *Exercise and Physical Activity*

The last notable buffer to strain that dog-ownership provides is exercise and physical activity. Ownership increases the likelihood of exercise, such as playing, walking and exercising with the dog as a companion (Marie & Cline, 2010). Police dogs require training that can be very physically demanding (Anderson, n.d.). However, exercise is proven to be an effective coping mechanism for strain by reducing stress, job burnout, depression and anxiety, while improving feelings of accomplishment, happiness and satisfaction (Ernst, 2014) (Hart, Zasloff, Bryson, & Christensen, 2000) (Marie & Cline, 2010).

A dog is an incentive to get out and about. During walks, dogs serve as a recipient and topic of conversation (Hart, Zasloff, Bryson, & Christensen, 2000) (Marie & Cline, 2010). This provides the owner with an immediate source of emotional support, while also facilitating a broader social network that may serve as source of support in the future (Marie & Cline, 2010).

Many of the studies cited here are based on the relationship between dogs and their own-

ers. However, it has been suggested that K-9 handlers experience these same benefits (Hart, Zasloff, Bryson, & Christensen, 2000). Taking both into account, it would be reasonable to assume that K-9s would buffer the stress of any and all officers in a department that has its own unit.

## Methods

Many small police departments lack the funding for their own K-9 units. They face many challenges such as obtaining government approval, officers willing to handle the K-9s, time and space to train, as well as sustainment issues. Although cutting costs can be difficult, especially in small departments, finding funding for units in small departments may have a positive effect on deterring crime and deviant behavior (both in the community and within the department itself) (Anderson, n.d.).

## Objective

This research explores the buffering effect K-9 units in police departments have on the psychological well-being of the department as a whole. If the benefit of having a dog is as great as these previous studies show, then it would make sense that similar effects would disseminate throughout all K-9 equipped departments.

In order to test this hypothesis, a survey has been developed to measure the strain officers' experience. The survey also asks questions regarding typical methods and strategies they use to cope with stress on the job. Access to and availability of support was also assessed. The surveys were distributed to police departments that have a permanent K-9 unit on the force, as well as to departments that do not. The results from each were compared against each other. A negative correlation between the permanent presence of a K-9 unit in a department and police officer strain was expected. Thus, providing evidence to support the notion that permanent K-9

units in a department effectively buffers the negative consequences of officer stress and strain.

## Procedures

Surveys were distributed to police stations in the New England area, and were completed voluntarily. No supervisors were present while the surveys were filled out. This was to ensure that no officer felt compelled to complete a survey. They were sealed and returned in the manila envelope provided.

Two of the four departments that originally agreed to participate completed surveys. Twenty were distributed to each. The department without K-9s returned 19 out of 20 surveys. The department with K-9s returned 15. The third department was hindered by technical difficulties. This unfortunately narrows the validity of the results; however, it provides a strong argumentative starting point for future research.

## Measures

*Coping Strategies:* Officers who participated were asked to answer a series of statements and questions based on the Likert scale. The first section was based on Tobin's Coping Strategy Inventory (Tobin, 1984, 2001). It asked officers to think of a stressful event or situation while policing and indicate how they responded based on a series of statements. Responses included "I found ways to blow off steam," "I avoided friends and family," "I talked to someone about how I was feeling," and "My feelings were overwhelming and they just exploded." The scale ranged from "Not at All" (0) to "Very Much" (4). The section concluded with a question of whether or not the officer responded to stressful situation and events unrelated to policing in the same way.

*Critical Incidents:* The next section was borrowed largely from The Critical Incident History Questionnaire for Police Officers published by The National Institutes of Health (Brunet, et al., 2001). Participants were asked to indicate how many times they have experienced a par-

ticular critical incident while on the job. Possible answers were: Never (0), 1-2 times (1), 3-5 times (2), 6-9 times (3), and 10 or more times (4). Incidents included “high speed chase,” “threatened with a gun or knife/non-firearm weapon,” “sexually abused child,” “being shot at,” “a loved one threatened,” and “seriously injured on duty.” This section intended to measure the frequency and severity of stressful situations and events in each officer’s life, and to better estimate the probable level of strain he/she was experiencing.

*Stress Related to the Police Environment:* Section IV focused on strain from the officer’s environment. This section asked officers to indicate how much they agree or disagree with each statement. The scale ranged from Strongly Disagree (0) to Strongly Agree (4). There were five questions in each category: Stressors internal to the agency... “Your community trusts their local police officers/department;” Stressors internal to the agency... “You are paid fairly as a police officer;” Stressors inherent to the nature of police work... “Your work schedule is flexible enough to plan for off-duty activities;” Personal stressors... “You feel that your job negatively affects your home life;” and Individual health assessment... “You feel worn out.”

*PTSD/AUDIT:* The following sections included the PTSD-Civilian Checklist (Weathers, 1994), as well as The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) (Higgins-Biddle, Saunders, Barbor, & Montiero, 2001). The former intended to measure the prevalence of PTSD symptoms among officers. The latter intended to measure the extent of alcohol use/abuse as a maladaptive coping strategy used among this population.

*K-9s:* Section VII asked about the status of K-9s in their department, followed by questions about their thoughts on K-9s in police departments. Participants were asked to indicate how strongly they agreed with each question in the Likert scale model. Questions included a list of case examples in which officers believed K-9s to be essential to; as well as, questions regarding the perceived health benefits of, efficiency, and public perception of K-9s. It then asked the of-

ficers to estimate the percentage of high risk calls they have responded to in which K-9s have been used, and the percentage of the calls in which K-9s apprehended the suspect (0% (0), 1-25% (1), 26-50% (2), 51-75% (3), 76-100% (4)). This section aimed to measure the benefits police officers themselves feel K-9s provide, and thus, their susceptibility to K-9s as buffers to their strain.

*Demographic:* The last section, VI, is demographic and includes questions such as age, sex, relationship status, number of children, number of pets; as well as, time spent with family, friends, and pets outside of work. Questions about volunteering in the community, and feeling as though they had someone to confide in were also included. These questions intended to assess the access and availability of social support in the officer’s life.

*Control:* The last question asked if the officer was currently on a K-9 unit. Handlers were not included in this study due to the constant contact they have with their dogs, which would unfairly expose them to the benefits of dog ownership. This study intends to measure the buffering effect K-9 units provide the *entire* department that they work for, as it is already suggested that handlers experience these benefits first hand (Hart, Zasloff, Bryson, & Christensen, 2000).

## Results

To simplify the following results, the abbreviation DW is used to indicate departments with K-9s, and DWO to indicate departments without K-9s. Of all the officers surveyed, the average age was 46.7 years old. The average amount of time officers spent working for their current department was 17.81 years, and 20.13 years policing in general. The majority of respondents were male (93.1%), and 79.3% of all respondents were married.

The average age of officers in DW was about 45 (44.9231), and 48 in DWO. The only female representatives came from DW. The of-

Officers from DW had an average of almost two years more experience policing than the officers in DWO (20.8889 vs 19.0769). A higher percentage of DW were married (83.3%), and a higher percentage of DWO were divorced (23.5). Only 87.9% of respondents answered that question. DWO were more likely to have children than DW. Officers in DW were more likely to own a dog than DWO (76.9% vs 52.9%). DW liked their pet much more than DWO (60% vs 9.1%).

In general, officers agreed or strongly agreed that they had someone to confide in; however, in total, more DWO disagreed (5.6%) or strongly disagreed (5.9%) with that statement. DW strongly disagreed 8.3%, but no one from DW disagreed. 88.9% of DWO had someone to confide in.

Results regarding **coping strategies** of officers used indicated that officers generally coped with issues the same way, whether they were in a department with or without a dog. A higher percentage of DWO spent time with friends and family, than DW; only 5.9% of DWO said not at all, compared to 28.6% DW.

In general, DW reported experiencing more **critical incidents** while policing in the last three years, than DWO. However, 23.6% of DWO reported being threatened with a weapon (non-firearm) more than 6 times, whereas 0% of DW reported being threatened more than 6 times.

Of the sample, 92.9% of DW had never been shot at. Having been shot at 1-2x occurred with 11.8% of DWO. One officer from DW reported being shot at 3-5x (7.1% of total). One hundred percent of DW had never shot at someone, one officer from DWO had 1-2x (5.9% of total). That representation attested for the percentage of DWO that had shot and injured someone.

In the last three years, 31.3% of DWO had been seriously injured on duty, compared to 14.2% of DW. Of the total, 85.7% of DW vs 68.8% of DWO had never been injured. A total of 31.3% of DWO reported being seriously in-

jured 1-2x (DW 7.1%). Yet, DW had 7.1% injured 3-5x.

In addition, no officers from DW reported having a colleague badly injured or killed, but a little less than half of DWO had (1-2x: 41.2%, 6-9x: 5.9%). A higher percentage of officers in DWO (35.3%) reported having a loved one threatened; 85.7% of DW never had this happen.

*Table 1:* An analysis of the surveys through cross-tabulating responses based on departments with and without K-9s found a positive association between K-9 presence and lower levels of **officer stress**. Officers were asked to respond by how much they agreed with the following statement: *You feel scared that something may happen to you on the job.* 16.7% of officers in DWO agreed with this statement, and 5.6% strongly agreed. In comparison, no officers from DW agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Instead, 28.6% strongly disagreed.

*Table 1: You feel scared that something may happen on the job \* Does current department have K9? Cross tabulation % within Does current department have K9?*

		Does current department have K9?		Total
		No	Yes	
You feel scared that something may happen on the job.	St. Disagree	16.7%	28.6%	21.9%
	Disagree	38.9%	35.7%	37.5%
	Neutral/Unsure	22.2%	35.7%	28.1%
	Agree	16.7%		9.4%
	St. Agree	5.6%		3.1%
Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Forty percent of the total respondents agreed that the community trusts the police. A higher percentage of officers DW (50%) agreed than DWO (33.3%). A high percentage of officers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: *your work contributes to health problems.* Representation from DWO had a higher percentage agree/strongly agree (72.2%) than DW (64.3%).

*Table 2:* We found a negative association between some **PTSD** symptoms and the presence of K-9s in the department. One question on the Checklist was *“In the last 30 days, have you ex-*

perienced feeling irritable or having angry outbursts?” 50% of officers in DW said they did not experience this at all. No one in K-9 departments reported this “Quite a bit.” DWO reported this moderately (17.6%), and quite a bit (5.9%). This suggests that K-9s do have an effect on the adverse effects of strain (PTSD symptoms).

**Table 2: 30 days feel irritable have angry outbursts \* Does current department have K9? Cross tabulation**  
% within Does current department have K9?

		Does current department have K9?		Total
		No	Yes	
30 days feel irritable have angry outbursts	Not at all	47.1%	50.0%	48.4%
	A little	29.4%	42.9%	35.5%
	Moderately	17.6%	7.1%	12.9%
	Quite a bit	5.9%		3.2%
Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

There was also some evidence that suggest K-9s may not have much effect on strain. In general, the associations between PTSD symptoms and having K-9s was not strong, and often non-existent. DW reported avoiding thinking/talking about stressful events, and avoiding activities/situations that remind them of a stressful event, more often than DWO. In addition, when asked if in the last thirty days, they had lost interest in things they had previously enjoyed, 76.5% of respondents from DWO said “Not at all” (64.3% with K-9). This loss of interest moderately occurred with 21.4% of officers in DW, compared to 0% of those in DWO (Table 3).

**Table 3: Lost interest in things you enjoyed \* Does current department have K9? Cross tabulation**  
% within Does current department have K9?

		Does current department have K9?		Total
		No	Yes	
In the last 30 days, you have lost interest in things you enjoyed.	Not at all	76.5%	64.3%	71.0%
	A little	11.8%	14.3%	12.9%
	Moderately		21.4%	9.7%
	Quite a bit	11.8%		6.5%
Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Both samples of departments seemed to agree that K-9s are beneficial in regards to public perception, efficiency and competence, safety, trust, and deterrence. Interestingly, 23.1% of DW strongly disagreed that K-9s deter crime, and 23.1% of the same department strongly agreed; 53.9% agreed/strongly agreed. No one from DWO strongly disagreed. Equal percentages in both strongly disagree and strongly agree were true for weapon deterrence (s/d: 25%, s/a: 25%); however, 5.9% of DWO strongly disagreed, while 58.3% of DW agreed/strongly agreed. No one from DW disagreed.

In DWO, 53% said they would want to be a K-9 handler; 16.6% of DW said the same.

Table 4: There was also a difference between DW and DWO in regards to happiness felt when K-9s are present. A third of DW strongly agreed with the statement “K-9 presence makes you feel happy,” and 25% agreed. A total of 29.6% of officers from all departments strongly agreed with the statement, as well. However, a large percentage of DWO strongly disagreed (46.7%).

**Table 4: K9 presence makes you feel happy \* Does current department have K9? Cross tabulation**  
% within Does current department have K9?

		Does current department have K9?		Total
		No	Yes	
K9 presence makes you feel happy.	St. Disagree	46.7%	8.3%	29.6%
	Disagree		16.7%	7.4%
	Neutral/Unsure	20.0%	16.7%	18.5%
	Agree	6.7%	25.0%	14.8%
	St. Agree	26.7%	33.3%	29.6%
Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

## Discussion

Based on literary foundations, the expectations of evidence from this survey was to find lower levels of strain in officers who worked in departments with a K-9 unit. Some of the analytical results supported this, some did not. The fol-

lowing discussion explores possible explanations of some key findings, in order to further suggest this hypothesis.

Of the coping strategies the officers used, the results from examples *I spent time with friends and family*, and *I didn't let my coworkers know how I was feeling*, can be explained through the substitution of a dog or K-9 for people. In regards to the former statement, it would be interesting to compare the percentage of DW who said not at all (28.6%), with dog ownership. A higher percentage of DW had dogs at home (76.9%). It is possible that those respondents did not spend time with family and friends because they had an alternative social support available: their dog.

The latter statement could be explained similarly. If K-9s were included as co-workers, the percentage of respondents who did express their feelings might increase.

When respondents were asked if they handle non-police related situations and events the same way, the results were evenly mixed.

Of the total respondents, 68.8% agreed or strongly agreed that their work contributed to health problems. A higher percentage came from DWO (54.3% vs 72.2%). This supports the idea that K-9s buffer the negative effects of strain. However, considering that DW are also more likely to be married, the access and availability of spousal support may be contributing factor. It would be reasonable to assume that because DW were more likely to be married and to own a dog at home, that working in a department with K-9s increases the chance of having a dog; which, buffers the role strain between the police role and marriage. This increases the chance of a positive relationship; which, provides an additional source of social support, thereby minimizing the negative effects of strain. Thus, working in a department with K-9s buffer the negative effects of strain.

There was also a positive association between having a K-9 and feeling scared that something might happen on the job. Other survey responses offer several reasons as to why

this association exists. In general, the department with K-9s experienced more critical incidents than the department without, with the exception of being threatened with a weapon, a badly injured/killed colleague, mutilated body/remains, badly injured child, a loved one threatened, being shot at, and having to shoot at someone (non-injure and injure). The department with K-9s may have had more experience with critical incidents because they were specifically called due to the fact that they had K-9s. In fact, the department without K-9s reported borrowing from the department with, when necessary.

However, the idea that K-9s deter crime could explain why DWO experienced a few of the critical incidents listed above, more than DW. K-9s offer crime deterrence, and an alternative to lethal force. The deterrence effect is further suggested by the number of instances DW experience being threatened with a non-firearm. Because weapons such as knives, needles, bludgeons and fists require close contact, the presence of a K-9 would deter the attacker through the fear of being bitten. The same deterrence effect explains why DW reported being injured on the job, as well as having a colleague injured or killed on the job fewer times than DWO.

Less officers reported being shot at in DW than in DWO; however, those who were shot at in DW, reported it having occurred more times than those in DWO. Evidence is unclear in this example.

Because K-9s also provide an alternative to lethal force, it is possible that the absence of K-9s is responsible for the higher percentage of DWO that had to shoot at, as well as shoot and injure/kill a suspect.

These incidents give evidentiary support for the buffering effects having a K-9 has on officer strain. Because of the utility K-9s have in these incidents, officers feel safer. Fear (Ganem, 2010) is a negative affectation that occurs when experiencing Agnew's (1992) noxious situations and/or events causing strain. K-9s may prevent many of these events from occurring, creating a

less formidable work environment, which decreases strain accordingly.

It is fair to say that most people like dogs. Departments with K-9s are regarded more positively by the public. A higher percentage of DW felt that they had their community's trust, that they are making a difference, and that their work is valued by others. Because negative public relations and anti-police sentiments are stressors related to officer strain, the ability K-9s have to better the public's attitude towards, and acceptance of the police buffers the relationship between that and strain.

In general, the total sample of officers felt that K-9s provided many benefits in community relations, efficiency, and health benefits. For this reason, most would be open to positive effects having a K-9 unit may have on their department. It was important to assess the beliefs officers had regarding K-9s, because poor reception on the officers' behalf would negate possible benefits the K-9s could provide.

Although the results from this survey were preliminary, they provided a strong basis for future research. Hopefully, the buffering effects K-9 units have on officer strain will be valued just as highly as the benefits they provide in the field. Ideally, all departments will be able to use this research to help support funding for their own unit. If simply adding K-9 units can lower strain and decrease resulting on and off the job violence, drug and alcohol use and abuse, as well as suicide, then having a K-9 unit is more important and more beneficial than ever imagined.

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