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Dietary Intake, Beliefs, and Barriers in a Cohort of Law Enforcement Personnel Undergoing Training

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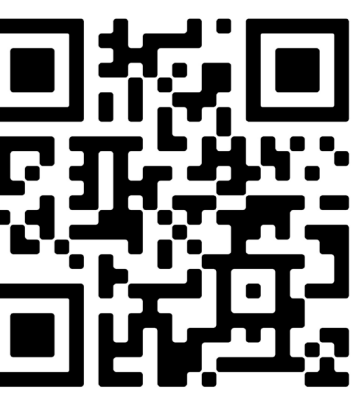
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Introduction

Law enforcement personnel have been recognized as having a high risk for several lifestyle-related health conditions [1-2].

The nature of their work, including sedentary roles interspersed with shift work, intermittent high-intensity activity and a high stress-load can have a negative impact on a law enforcement personnel's health [3-4].

Law enforcement personnel attending training may follow suboptimal dietary practices which can impair performance or enhance their risk for nutrition-related chronic diseases.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to describe food habits, barriers, and beliefs of a cohort of law enforcement personnel to advise appropriate nutrition support.

Methods

Law enforcement personnel (n=159) undergoing recruit and other training were surveyed at a recruitment training unit.

The sample included custody assistants, civilian jailers, sworn deputies, police officers, and reserve peace officers with a median age 26.5 (19-60) years

Validated paper-based surveys were conducted including *The Perceived Barriers to Healthy Eating*, *Food Choice Questionnaire* and *Rapid Eating Assessment for Participants*. Survey data were analysed using SPSS Statistics. Categorical variables were reported as frequency (n) and total percentage (%). Percentages refer to valid data available for variables.

Results & Discussion

- Demographic related characteristics and descriptive results are shown in Table 1
- Overall, 91% (n=143) of participants placed high importance on consuming nutritious food that keeps them healthy
- 80% (n=126) placed importance on consuming food high in vitamins and minerals.
- 80% (n=127) emphasized high protein content and 41% (n=62) reported following a high protein diet
- 50% reported not following a special diet (n=77).
- Additional reported variables of high importance for food choice were taste (84%, n=134), availability (82%, n=131), ability to keep them awake and alert (80%, n=127), value for money (77%, n=123), simple to cook (72%, n=114) and easy to prepare (67%, n=106).
- Reported barriers to healthy eating were busy lifestyle (60%, n=94), irregular working hours (41%, n=64), lengthy food preparation (35%, n=55), price of healthy food (32%, n=51) and cooking skills (30%, n=48).
- Overall however, 80% (n=127) stated they were very willing to make changes in eating habits to be healthier.
- Perceived beneficial support to eat healthier included family support, meal preparation, increasing knowledge of healthy eating, cooking and food preparation and seeking guidance from a nutritionist/professional.



Table 1. Demographic related characteristics and descriptive results

Characteristic n (%)	Overall (n=159)
Gender	
Male	116 (74%)
Female	40 (26%)
Age (years) median (range)	27 (19-60)
Weight (lbs) median (range)	175 (110-280)
Height (ft) median (range)	5.8 (4.6 – 6.5)
Resistance training	
1 session per week	15 (9%)
2 sessions per week	35 (22%)
3 sessions per week	58 (37%)
≥4 sessions per week	50 (32%)
Endurance/aerobic	
1 session per week	6 (4%)
2 sessions per week	36 (23%)
3 sessions per week	64 (40%)
≥4 sessions per week	53 (33%)
Follows a special diet	
No	71 (46%)
Yes	82 (54%)
High protein	62 (40.5%)
Low-carb	22 (14.4%)
Salt-reduced	17 (11.1%)
No sugar	13 (8.5%)
High-carb	12 (7.8%)
Low-Calorie	10 (6.5%)
Who most often prepares meals	
Only me	77 (48.4%)
Family member	45 (28.3%)
Partner	22 (13.8%)
Other	8 (5.0%)



Conclusion

This study highlights food habits, barriers and beliefs of law enforcement personnel undergoing training.

Understanding unique needs and barriers of dietary intake in law enforcement personnel undergoing training is important to tailor appropriate nutrition support for motivated personnel.

Operational Relevance:

As soldiers are often called to peace-keeping and law enforcement-type missions, review of law enforcement literature of similar challenges can be beneficial.

Police officers are at a higher risk of cardiovascular disease than the general population.

Dietary intake is strongly linked to health and performance.

Well-intentioned nutrition programs that instruct personnel on what they 'should' eat as a base without a practical and tailored approach may not be successful.

Modifiable changes that recognize challenges to support law enforcement personnel to improve dietary intake will have clear implications for their disease-risk and performance.

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