



# An Investigation Into the Psychological Effects of Undercover Policing

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## Abstract

Throughout history, the evolution of crime has been responded to with an evolution in crime fighting tactics. One of these tactics was undercover operations, which were developed to combat specific varieties of crime beginning with white collar crimes and government corruption. Today, undercover operations are utilized in many other ways as well, ranging from drug stings to online operations targeting sex crimes. While these developments have greatly aided and advanced justice over the years, the time has come to begin addressing the negative effects of undercover operations on the individual officers. Evidence has demonstrated over the years that undercover operations lead to risks of negative psychological effects upon the officers involved. By engaging with past and present literature, promising corrections and solutions to some of the underlying causes of negative effects have been recognized. These resolutions include: increased training, a new attitude surrounding mental health within law enforcement, and providing a variety of mental health resources to the officers. With the potential to decrease the severity of negative psychological effects for officers returning from undercover operations, these solutions should be taken into consideration by law enforcement leadership nationwide. It is also recommended that further research be conducted on this topic to assess the effectiveness of each proposed solution as well as recognize any further areas for improvement.

## Keywords

Undercover policing, psychological effects, reintegration, identity, training, recovery strategies

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# An Investigation into the Psychological Effects of Undercover Policing

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## Abstract

Crime fighting tactics have evolved alongside the evolution of crime, one tactic being undercover operations, which were developed to combat varieties of crime beginning with white-collar crimes and government corruption. Today, undercover operations offer many other uses as well, ranging from drug stings to online operations targeting sex crimes. While these have advanced justice over the years, the time has come to begin addressing the negative effects of undercover operations on individual officers. Researchers have demonstrated that undercover operations lead negative psychological effects on the officers involved. Engaging with past and present literature has led to promising corrections and solutions to some of these negative effects' underlying causes. Resolutions include increased training, a new attitude surrounding mental health in law enforcement, and a provided variety of mental health resources to the officers. With the potential to decrease the severity of negative psychological effects for officers returning from undercover operations, these solutions should be taken into consideration by law enforcement leadership nationwide. Moreover, researchers should conduct further studies on this topic to assess the effectiveness of each proposed solution as well as recognize any further areas for improvement.

Keywords: Undercover policing, psychological effects, reintegration, identity, training, recovery strategies

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## Introduction

“ The effectiveness of a law enforcement body...depends on the quality of the methods used to prevent and combat crime” (Cichoń, 2012).

Undercover police operations have been used throughout the United States and the rest of the world for many decades. Such operations have only continued to grow in popularity among law enforcement agencies since the shift from reactive to proactive policing (Kruisbergen et. al., 2011). Reactive policing involves a police reaction to a crime that has already taken place or is in the midst of taking place (Muhlhausen, 2018). Conversely proactive policing places the emphasis of law enforcement on the events leading to the occurrence of a crime. Undercover operations serve as a proactive way for police departments and agencies to combat crime and protect the public. The importance of undercover operations is documented in a 2005 report from the United States Office of the Inspector General:

The use of undercover techniques, including proprietary business entities, is essential to the detection, prevention, and prosecution of white-collar crime, public corruption, terrorism, organized crime, offenses involving controlled substances, and other priority areas of investigation (qtd in Office of the Inspector General, 1982/2005).

Both the continued uprising of drug-related crimes in the United States and

this prominent shift in ideology relating to policing practices contribute to the use of undercover operations nationwide. However, while the history and utility of such operations is documented and generally well understood, often the effects of undercover work on the officers go unnoticed or underreported. In recent decades, as movements to increase mental health awareness have begun to sprout, little research has been conducted on how undercover police operations can affect the officers. Thus, this research project will seek to bridge the gap in current research and explain that the further development of training and preparation policies for officers participating in undercover operations will alleviate the negative psychological effects of undercover operations on the individual officer. By making this determination, the research will provide guidance for law enforcement agencies and departments alike to begin developing and implementing policies in order to improve the psychological outcomes of undercover police operations. There is no question that police officers and other federal officials make extreme sacrifices in order to serve the purpose of undercover operations. Therefore, as much as possible should be done to protect them and prevent them from having to sacrifice more than is necessary. Throughout the research process, with the above determination in mind, this project will also aim to answer the following questions: How can the effects of undercover police operations be better managed and prevented? Do the current methods of

training and preparation for undercover operations adequately prepare officers mentally for their time undercover?

## Literature Review

Since the rise of various mental health awareness movements in the late 1900s and early 2000s, there has been an increasing amount of attention and time devoted to research in mental health fields. Understandably there is a strong relational tie between careers in law enforcement and psychological studies regarding mental health, as law enforcement officers endure extreme stress that often leads to negative psychological outcomes. The following questions are then posed: Does a connection between undercover police operations and adverse psychological effects exist? If so, what are the underlying contributing factors aside from the obvious tension of the work? Finally, what has been done and what is being done in order to eliminate or diminish the contributing factors? Scholars in both criminal justice and psychology disciplines continue to study these questions in hopes that gaps in the research may be filled and further developments be made to the benefit of the professionals involved. While many scholars agree that there is a connection between undercover police operations and psychological outcomes, they do vary in their determinations of whether the outcomes are positive or negative and if the outcomes are either due to additional underlying factors or simply an aspect of the career. Additionally there is still a significant remaining need for

further research to be conducted in the present era in order to continue the progression of policies and practices in an ever-changing law enforcement climate.

## Historical Background and Purposes

Undercover police operations have existed for centuries, with early evidence of spies and informants dating back to early Rome; however, they rose to popularity in the mid-to-late 1900s (Kruisbergen et al., 2011). This was largely due to the success of ABSCAM, a large-scale Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI] undercover operation. ABSCAM spanned from 1978- 1980, serving primarily to recover stolen “treasures” such as paintings, as well as fraudulent stocks and bonds (FBIa). The success of the operation was incredible, resulting in the arrest and conviction of nineteen people total, including six United States Congressmen and one senator (Mayberry, 2016). As a result, this operation also had an impact in winning the favor of the judicial system in the United States, due largely to the extent of success in removing corrupt individuals from places of power (Bonney, 2015). However, other sources indicate that it was the ABSCAM operation that diminished public trust, due to the excessive and seemingly unlimited scope of the operation (Wamsley, 2015). While it is sensible that there would be unrest among the public upon learning of such an extensive undercover operation, the hundreds of pages of FBI records filled with positive public responses indicate that many also

deemed it a raging success in the name of justice (FBIb). Regardless of public and judicial opinions on the matter, undercover operations still prevailed.

While most frequently recognized for aiding in drug and organized crime-related investigations, undercover officers are utilized for many various reasons including surveillance, prevention, and facilitation (Bonney, 2015). There are two primary types of undercover operations: short-term surveillance and “deep cover” operations. Short-term operations primarily require waiting and watching until a crime has been committed. The officers will then announce their presence and arrest the proper individuals. In contrast, “deep cover” operations require the creation of a false identity and appearance, and relationships are created in order to further the operation (Miller, 2006). “Deep cover” operations naturally require a greater commitment and sacrifice from the officer(s) involved. However, “deep cover” operations are most frequently used in situations involving large crime networks. Short-term operations can be used to collect prosecutorial evidence in various investigation settings. Regardless of their length, undercover operations are an incredible asset to the police force.

## **Selection Process and Standards**

Historically the selection process for undercover officers was largely influenced by the processes in which World War II secret agents were recruited (Girodo, 1997). World War II secret

agents hired by the Office of Strategic Services [OSS], otherwise recognized as the predecessor to the Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], were selected and trained with a strong “... emphasis on prowess, self-confidence, and self-reliance on hazardous missions, [and] instruction in close-combat techniques” (Chambers, 2010, p.6). While the secret agents of World War II played a tremendous role in the success of the Allies, the selection efforts were lacking in many ways. These standards and processes led many departments and agencies astray regarding how to properly select a qualified candidate. Nonetheless, the historical process began to lay the framework for a selection assessment process, and while the exact standards and assessment tools have varied over the following years, the development of an assessment was a crucial step (Girodo, 1997).

Now while the selection process for undercover operations is similar to that of any other job position, there are some additional components involved. As is usual, there is an expectation that the officer will have knowledge of the key elements of the job. For an undercover officer, such things would include: “knowledge of tactics, weapons, legal principles, undercover strategies, evidence collection and preservation” (Miller, 2006, p.4). The officers must demonstrate their knowledge through a rigorous screening process. Burton indicates that although the screening process is incredibly similar to that a traditional officer endures, traits such as resourcefulness, assertiveness, maturity, relational stability, and the ability to follow instructions are simply

more critical for undercover officers (1995). Another important factor of the screening process for undercover operations is the psychological component. Screenings typically include a combination of a clinical interview and psychological testing (Miller, 2006). This is a crucial part of the selection process; undercover officers that are psychologically fit are bound to perform better undercover, and they are more likely to return from the operation with fewer psychological effects (Wamsley, 2015). If an officer who does not meet the screening criteria is pushed through the process anyway, this can be detrimental to both the operation and the individual officer. It is also important that officers are never coerced into working as an undercover operation; for safety and success, it is critical that the officer volunteers for the undercover position (Burton, 1995). Having an unwilling undercover officer can be dangerous individually and collectively. Taking these factors into consideration, the selection process for undercover officers must be rigorous, steadfast, and voluntary in order to be successful.

## **Training and Preparation**

Apart from the selection process of undercover officers, the training and preoperative preparation is also important. Having thorough training and preparation allows for officers to be acquainted with the trials and difficulties they may encounter and be able to develop plans of action. Officers must be allowed an adequate amount of time to prepare, as well; it is not ideal to expedite such a crucial part of the process.

Unfortunately training processes are commonly minimal and severely lacking in quality. Many departments seem to ascribe to the belief that undercover officers should simply be able to make critical decisions on impulse without thorough training beforehand (Wamsley, 2015). This is further supported by Farkas's study, which found that 56% of undercover officers reported their training was inadequate, and 41% reported their training was simply lacking in quality (1986). Of course, police departments and agencies do have training requirements; however, most are viewed as a minimum requirement to meet, not a foundation to build upon (McHenry, 2019). This philosophy of a minimum requirement equating to a satisfied need is only one reason why undercover officer training may be lacking. As detailed by Wamsley, training comes in many formats for undercover officers, some of which are mandatory like on the job training, whereas others are voluntary and offered through various agencies. These voluntary trainings are strongly recommended by Wamsley as they provide additional preparation for the officers' undercover duties and contribute valuable insights that the officers would not otherwise be aware of (2015).

An Undercover Safeguard Unit is another option that can be used by a department or agency to better educate officers. Undercover safeguard processes can provide specialized training for future undercover officers through classroom teaching and role-playing activities. These processes have

demonstrated to be useful in not only preparing the officers for their undercover operations but also in alleviating some of the negative psychological effects of such operations. Undercover safeguard processes are valuable to undercover officers as a dedicated team addresses their needs throughout every step of the operation, beginning with selection and concluding with reintegration. These safeguard processes and the teams functioning within them must be firmly grounded in their purpose, their primary goal being to protect and serve undercover officers as well as possible (Krause, 2008). By utilizing undercover safeguard techniques, departments and agencies can improve the training offered to undercover officers and protect them throughout the operation.

Through the selection process, the department or agency will eliminate any officers that do not satisfy the requirements for undercover operations. They will also determine whether an officer has the necessary disposition and cognitive abilities to serve as an undercover officer. This can become difficult as some abilities can either be inherently possessed or developed through training and education. One critical example of this is the skill of adaptability. A study conducted by Oleszkiewicz et. al. found that adaptability can be a key component throughout an undercover officer's operation. Adaptability was defined in this study as "cognitive, behavioral and emotional adjustments that assist in effectively responding to novel and uncertain situations" (2022). By having the ability to adapt to uncertain situations while undercover, an officer can

establish rapport easier and is better equipped to serve in his or her role. While there are most certainly aspects of adaptability that must come naturally, there is still room for additional training in this area, as well. Training is important regardless of profession; however, as mentioned above, undercover officers are in a unique position and as such, should be trained as much as possible before entering the field.

## **Psychological Effects**

As one can imagine, numerous psychological effects can plague undercover officers. To expand on their devastation, Charlie Fuller, the executive director of the International Association of Undercover Officers, said, "Shootouts happen, but more officers are suspended, fired, jailed or killed because of psychological issues rather than for physical reasons" (Schreiber, 2013, p. 20). This portion of the literature review will seek to explain the various psychological effects that undercover officers can experience. It is important to note that there is an understandable level of overlap between the psychological effects that burden traditional police officers and those that burden undercover officers. These overlapping effects are just as important as those that do not overlap with traditional officers. However, the psychological effects that are distinguishable will be noted throughout.

Some of the major psychological disturbances noted by Miller are paranoia, hypervigilance, corruption of moral compass, and increased sympathy toward the target(s). However, Miller also notes in his study that a vast majority of



undercover officers endure amounts of stress and anxiety that are common and normal for the line of work, but rarely are removed from undercover operations due to mental health concerns (2006). While that is entirely valid, Curran notes that “undercover work has been identified as one of the most stress-inducing tasks a police officer can engage in, with undercover drug investigations being one of the most stressful assignments” (2021, p. 257). Both Miller and Curran do agree, however, that the most common and uniform stressor in undercover policing is the fear of discovery (Miller, 2006; Curran, 2021). This fear can reasonably account for the anxiety many undercover officers feel during the operation, but it can also contribute to the development of paranoia and other serious psychological conditions. Band and Sheehan noted many other stressors that can also come into play while undercover; these include but are not limited to lack of management commitment or support, personal problems, interagency cooperation, and development of personal relationships with target(s) (1999). It is evident even now that there are a significant number of stressors that come into play during an undercover operation. While these stressors can certainly lead to serious psychological effects, one must note that such results are not guaranteed.

Two specific stressors that affect undercover officers uniquely are loss of identity and reintegration into society. Loss of identity can lead to a breakdown of personal values and beliefs as well as create an overidentification with the target/target group (Band & Sheehan,

1999). This loss of self can be encouraged by the isolation from undercover operations and the need to conform to the profile of the target. The longer an officer is undercover in a single role, the greater risk there is that they lose their sense of self and become more like the very thing they are pretending to be (Marx, 1982). Girodo et. al. conducted a fascinating study regarding a possible link between undercover operations and dissociative identity disorder [DID]. This study concluded:

...Predispositions to dissociative experiences, private mental rehearsals of having a false persona, leading to a fabricated identity that experiences some constraint from being expressed openly—these appear to make it more likely that an alter identity will surface in an undercover agent (2002, p.642).

This study indicates how severe an undercover officer’s loss of identity can become. Another study by Farkas found that 17% of undercover officers reported extreme personal changes after the completion of their undercover operation. Within that 17%, however, only 12% indicated that the change was negative (1986). Charlie Fuller developed the “Duck Theory” to explain the loss of identity and the challenges relating to undercover operations. This theory is defined as follows:

They want you to dress like a duck, talk like a duck, act like a duck, deal with ducks...and it's very easy, if you're not careful, to become a

duck. It's an erosion of who you really were to begin with. No one really tells [officers] that's what's going to happen (Schreiber, 2013, p.21).

The identity challenges may be difficult to avoid in undercover police operations is certainly cause for concern. This further reinforces the necessity for proper selection, as any indication that an officer is at greater risk for this loss of identity should be a disqualifying factor for undercover officers.

The second unique stressor for undercover officers is that of reintegration into society. Reintegration for an undercover officer refers to the process in which they are terminated from an operation and return to their previous norms. Numerous factors can impact the challenges and successes of an officer's reintegration process. The duration of an officer's undercover operation will naturally impact, whether positively or negatively, the reintegration process. Officers may adjust back into their previous lives more easily after shorter operations, whereas the officer is further removed from their norms and personal identity for longer undercover operations, thus increasing the challenge for them to reintegrate. The reintegration process can become increasingly difficult for undercover officers depending on the presence of any other psychological effects they are experiencing. For instance, if an officer is struggling with their identity, it will make it more difficult to reintegrate into a family setting or even continue to build relationships of any variety. Being unable to discuss the operation or any

personal struggles relating to the operation can also make officers face difficulty (Kowalczyk & Sharps, 2016). This only adds to a sense of isolation that can be detrimental to an undercover officer attempting to reintegrate into society. A study conducted by Macleod found that the most common reactions of undercover officers during reintegration are feelings of sadness, relief, and fatigue. Macleod also found that 59% of undercover officers had no reintegration challenges from a clinical perspective, and 24% had some relatively minor clinical challenges during reintegration that were overcome easily through counseling. While it is encouraging to see such a large portion of undercover officers reintegrate with little to no psychological effects, Macleod also notes that clinical symptoms often develop over time. Researchers report that officers can develop and report severe psychological symptoms two to five years after their termination (1995). This study indicates both the complexity of reintegration and the importance of a lasting presence of mental health resources for law enforcement officers. As mentioned above, reintegration involves many complex variables that can significantly impact the reaction an officer has to the reintegration process. These reactions, as indicated by Macleod, can take months to years to develop, or they may not react negatively at all. Therefore, it is important for departments and agencies to be sufficiently prepared to assist and support each individual officer's reintegration process.

A study conducted by Love et. al. found that the act of returning to more traditional police work can aid an undercover officer through the reintegration process as returning to a known process can work to help distress (2008). However, there are others that conclude reintegration into the workforce should be a gradual process in order to prevent shock and/or a complete mental shutdown from the officer (Kowalczyk & Sharps, 2016). Regardless, reentry is necessary if an officer wishes to remain in the workforce, and an individualized approach to the process is likely to be the best response. This would allow the department and officer to work collaboratively to determine the best course of action for that individual, which prevents having a universal rule that cannot be universally applied. It can be frustrating from an administrative or leadership perspective to not have a clear solution to a problem such as reintegration. However, it is encouraging to see indications that while the reintegration process will almost certainly be challenging for an undercover officer, there are still ways to make the transitional period smoother. This can be through personalizing the officer's reentry into the traditional workforce and having immediate access to mental health resources.

## Recover Strategies

Farkas found that 42% of undercover officers within his sample reported problems following their transition out of an undercover operation. This also includes an increase in reported psychiatric symptoms (1986). While there is

certainly evidence that suggests undercover officers face challenges following the end of an undercover operation, Kowalczyk and Sharps note that psychologists can serve a critical role in helping an undercover officer through the transition back into society and everyday life. Psychologists can reduce the return or development of negative psychological effects by providing positive aid early in the process. Kowalczyk and Sharps indicate that allowing the officers an adequate amount of time to decompress and readjust is a crucial aspect of a successful reintegration process. They also note that the earlier a psychologist is able to begin working with an undercover officer, the greater chance there is of decreasing negative psychological effects (2016). Naturally there are many strategies officers can employ themselves throughout the reintegration process to alleviate the effects of their undercover operations. However, unless given information regarding other effective recovery and reintegration practices, officers may revert to unhealthy practices such as drinking and/or the unsafe use of drugs (Farkas, 1986; Kowalczyk & Sharps, 2016).

In another study, Sharps details the necessity for proper psychoeducation regarding coping mechanisms that can assist the officers throughout daily life and set them on a positive trajectory for recovery (Sharps, 2020). Primarily the officer must be able to seek the support of both colleagues and mental health professionals in order to ensure their transition goes as smoothly as possible (Macleod, 1995). However, the mental

health stigma in law enforcement culture is ever present. Addressing mental health concerns within the law enforcement field is incredibly complex and encompasses many fears officers may have. Officers may fear discovery from their department and superiors, being labeled by others within the workforce as weak or unable to do their job. Some may even fear being demoted or rejected promotions due to coming forward with mental health concerns (Garnett & Eure, 2019). Therefore, while a department may provide mental health resources to their officers, the likelihood the officers will use these resources is diminished primarily out of such fears.

## **Modern Developments in Modern Day Policing**

As do most things, undercover operations have continued to evolve as the surrounding culture does. While there are still undercover operations that are physically involved, there is a new upsurge of web-based undercover operations as well. These operations often involve officers posing as underage youths in order to capture suspects for crimes relating to sexual offenses or pornography. As noted above, there are two primary forms of undercover operations: short term and “deep cover.” However, the differences between the two begin to blur when entering the atmosphere of web-based undercover operations. These operations are typically short in duration, thus being similar to the above definition of a short-term operation. However, web-based undercover operations often

require the adoption and personification of an alternate identity; this aspect of a web-based operation, then, fits into the above definition of a “deep cover” operation. Therefore, web-based undercover operations are unique in that they fit both definitions for short term and “deep cover” operations.

In 2007, Internet Crimes Against Children [ICAC] task forces were instituted nationwide. The Department of Justice funds these task forces, which represent approximately three-thousand law enforcement and prosecutorial agencies across the nation, whether local, state, or federal. ICAC task forces specifically target criminals using the internet for child exploitation or child pornography. Approximately 25% of the arrests made by ICAC task forces are a result of web-based undercover operations (Mitchell et. al., 2010). Online undercover operations are generally short-term operations beginning in internet chat rooms or through social media. As with the other forms of undercover operations, the officers involved in these online undercover operations receive specific training for the position. However, many note that the training is lacking and often the more specialized training for niche aspects of the online operations are geared toward child pornography and leave other areas behind (Tetzlaff-Bemiller, 2011). While this study does not elaborate on the effects of online undercover operations, the shorter operation lengths and ability to conduct the operation remotely provide safeguards from many common psychological issues that plague traditional undercover officers. Although online

undercover operations protect officers from the typical psychological effects of traditional undercover operations, these remote operations can still produce negative effects. These psychological risks may not materialize in the same manners as with traditional undercover operations, but due to the large involvement of child pornography or other sex crimes in web-based undercover operations, psychological strain and distress is still likely to occur. Traditional undercover operations will exist long into the future, as the drug and gang industries do not seem to have an end in sight. However, the development of remote, online undercover operations provides a safety net and a viable option for officers and police departments to catch suspects without incurring the risks involved with in-person undercover operations.

## Conclusion

While the above literature demonstrates disagreements among scholars and researchers regarding the specific psychological effects—whether positive or negative—that plague undercover officers and the various techniques available to treat the effects, very few scholars or law enforcement professionals deny the existence of any negative psychological effects following an undercover police operation. Looking at the literature, it is clear that current policies are in place to protect the officer from undue harm both physically and mentally while serving undercover, such as the extensive selection criteria. However, research demonstrates shortcomings as well,

seen through the limited training processes and follow-up protocols following an operation. There is certainly room for improvement in these areas.

Past and present research on this topic has brought to light many crucial aspects of undercover operations and their various effects. Whether it is the distinction between psychological effects of everyday police procedures and undercover operations, or the possible recovery strategies used by officers and departments to relieve psychological burdens, the above research has greatly aided the progression of law enforcement policies and procedures. However, there are still areas in which the literature has demonstrated a need for further development. While this need is shown through the literature, the specific connection between the psychological effects of undercover operations and the shortcomings of law enforcement agencies has not been clearly solidified. While that is a connection this current study seeks to strengthen, future research will be necessary to supply quantifiable data to support and assess the effectiveness of the solution strategies.

## Methodology

This research project relied heavily upon qualitative procedures. The majority of the data collected was done so through content analysis. It was possible to delve into many various articles, books, and published testimonies from the early 1900s to the modern eras. Such a range allowed for the evolution

of the research and undercover operational procedures to be better understood. While there is not much quantitative data available regarding undercover police operations, there were a few sources that offered up valuable insights into subjects like the prominence of psychological effects relating to undercover officers. There is also limited survey data available helps determine the quality of training and procedures that undercover officers endure. These data sources combined offer quantitative support and reinforcement of the qualitative research findings.

This research methodology presented its own challenges and limitations for the project at hand. Due to the nature of undercover operations (i.e., their sensitivity and/or classified status), the ability to take advantage of personal testimony was severely diminished. Thus, the only opportunity for personal testimony to be utilized in this study was through published testimonies found in news articles and other research. Another limitation to personal testimony is the persisting stigma surrounding mental health, especially in law enforcement communities. It is also important to note the impact of this persistent stigma on the available statistics relating to prominence and occurrence of psychological effects following undercover police operations. Regarding the limited statistical evidence provided addressing psychological effects in undercover officers, it is likely that it is underreported.

## **Key Issues in Undercover Policing**

In this discussion, the current literature demonstrates that three key issues exist in varying capacities across the nation. In order to present and develop viable solutions to these key issues, it is necessary first to assess them in depth to have a greater understanding of exactly what is trying to be resolved. The first issue is the severe shortcomings of undercover officer training, which leads to underprepared and more vulnerable officers in the field. As mentioned in the literature, 56% of undercover officers surveyed within the Honolulu Police Department reported inadequate training and 41% reported training lacking in quality (Farkas, 1986). It is indeed cause for concern when approximately half of the surveyed undercover officers reported lacking training procedures. Many other specialized officer teams, such as SWAT, receive extensive and rigorous training prior to being considered fit for duty. Contrastively many departments seem content with the minimal amount of training for undercover officers, who often encounter dangerous situations similar to what a SWAT team would (Miller, 2006). While there are mandated training requirements for traditional police officers and undercover officers alike, the minimum requirement is commonly viewed as sufficient (McHenry, 2019). If we take into consideration the additional burdens taken up by undercover officers, it would be rational to take extra care with their training. Undercover officers endure extreme stress of a different variety than is known by a traditional

officer. There is also a high amount of pressure placed upon undercover officers, as one mistake can lead to discovery and the eruption of an entire operation. These burdens and many others are unique to undercover officers; thus, sufficient additional training is required in order to prepare officers for their operations. While there is, of course, additional training that takes place for undercover officers, the data demonstrates that departments and agencies do not place a high enough priority upon this specialized training.

The second key issue is the negative psychological consequences that follow undercover police operations. These consequences can lead to impaired work abilities in the future among other detrimental complications. Undercover officers are forced to cope and adapt to undue amounts of stress while undercover, whether it is related to being in close contact with known criminals, fear of discovery, or the tension between building relationships with criminals but not becoming one. This stress can present dangers to the officer while undercover; however, it can become a threat to the officer after their termination from the operation, as well. Their stress can reappear in many varying forms or multiple forms at once. An undercover officer may suffer from paranoia, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), loss of personality, or any combination of these. These severe psychological effects can deteriorate personal relationships, jeopardize the officer's law enforcement career, and severely affect their quality of life in general. Following an undercover

operation, an officer who struggles mentally is at a greater risk of being harmed on duty or reacting in an unwarranted manner after returning to normal duties. This can lead to disciplinary action, suspension, or permanent dismissal (Schreiber, 2013). In addition to the professional challenges officers may face as a result of negative psychological effects, officers may face personal challenges. Mental health challenges can severely disrupt personal relationships if managed improperly, a serious problem that, if not addressed, can be irreversible. However, if personal relationships deteriorate, it causes a secondary problem of limiting the support system available to the officer. A support system is a crucial component of mental health recovery; thus, preserving personal relationships both within and outside the workplace is important.

The final issue relates to the many complications that can arise during the officer's reintegration process. Reintegration is the crucial time during which an undercover officer begins the transition from their undercover identity back to their personal reality. The reintegration process is one that is highly complex due to a number of variables: the individual officer, their support system, the nature of their undercover operation, the extent of the psychological effects the officer is experiencing, and whether there are any outside stressors affecting the officer. Often this period of adjustment is incredibly sensitive, as the officer is trying to break free from the identity they have clung to for the duration of their operation,

including the habits they developed. At the same time, though, the officer must recall their true identity and all of the personal features they abandoned for the operation, such as their personality, habits, and relationships. Understandably so, this transition often does not come easily. Those around the officer often expect an instant reversion, but more likely the process happens gradually over time. Unfortunately this gradual reversion can create additional tension and negatively impact the officer's reintegration. The reintegration period is also a time in which, if not addressed, officers can develop negative coping mechanisms to deal with the frustrations and tensions involved with readapting. Many officers turn to drugs or alcohol during these periods, which can then impact their ability to return to work (Farkas, 1986). This can quickly become a vicious cycle of harm to the officer: tension is created or naturally present, the officer develops or uses unhealthy coping mechanisms, he or she is unable to return to work due to their coping strategies, tension is created, and so on. While the department or agency cannot easily solve every complex problem created by the reintegration process, something must be done to alleviate the issues in order to set the returning officers up for success.

## **Propose Solutions to Key Issues**

Four proposed solutions correspond to the key issues presented. The first solution regards the issue of minimal training policies and procedures and is

two-pronged: the baseline training should be increased exponentially in order to best prepare officers for their time undercover, but additional training outside of the local department should be offered and recommended for all officers who are currently pursuing undercover positions or in between operations. As the current literature has recorded, undercover police officers are offered a severely limited amount of training prior to their operations. While every department will have varying programs and policies regarding training, the data reflects that a nationwide increase in undercover officer training would be a net positive. Pragmatically speaking, officers will be more prepared for their operation after completing a greater amount of training. Not only will they gain practical experience, but they will also have greater self-confidence and communication skills (McHenry, 2019). Also, many voluntary training programs are currently available to police officers. Researchers have demonstrated such programs to be effective in providing further education and preparation for officers (Wamsley, 2015). Thus, the second prong of this solution recommends that departments and agencies, at a minimum, strongly endorse these outside training programs to their officers. Requiring these programs for additional training credit would be a step above. After implementing this solution, the department or agency should conduct routine assessments in order to determine any weaknesses in their programs or implementation strategies. A factor these assessments should focus on is whether the training improvements have had an



impact on the officers' functioning and confidence while undercover. This data should be collected through anonymous surveys sent out on a six-month or annual basis. It should also be noted that for maximum effectiveness, every officer who participated in the new training program(s) should be required to fill out these surveys. The retrieved data should be analyzed to determine if there are any additional changes that need to be made to the program, whether in duration or content.

The second and third proposed solutions correspond to the issue of negative psychological effects following undercover operations: police departments and agencies nationwide should begin to specifically target the stigma in law enforcement professions relating to undercover police operations, and policy improvements should be made in order to make an array of mental health services available to officers. Addressing the mental health stigma within law enforcement environments is a crucial step toward providing aid to undercover officers struggling with the effects of their operation. With this powerful stigma still at play, even if the resources are made available, many officers would not take advantage of them out of shame or fear of discovery. In order for departments and agencies to begin to address this stigma, they must target it directly from the top down. Much of the process of deteriorating stigma revolves around transparency. Those in leadership roles within the law enforcement agency must begin the conversation about mental health to open the door for those under them to feel comfortable

speaking about their own struggles. Second, policy improvements should be made in order to make an array of mental health services available to officers 1) prior to the start of the operation and 2) upon returning from the undercover operation. The United States Department of Justice (USDOJ) has already begun this process and has collected case studies to demonstrate what is effective and what is not. This process began with the Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act of 2017. Through the case studies, the USDOJ has determined the following to be promising departmental adjustments regarding mental health: leadership support from the top down, hosting wellness programs while officers are on-duty to encourage participation and accessibility, providing mental health referrals for therapy outside of the department to promote honesty and openness, open feedback throughout the department, involving retired officers in mental health programming, and using mental health and wellness programs to address officers' personal needs and challenges (Copple et. al., 2019). These suggestions are just a few examples of how departments can implement changes that effectively benefit the mental health of their officers. While these solutions are geared toward an entire department or agency, implementing such changes will positively impact both traditional and undercover officers.

The final proposed solution relates to the reintegration complications that many officers face upon their termination from an undercover operation:

police departments and agencies should put into practice procedures that encourage successful reintegration. There must be a wide variety of procedures in order to accommodate the personal differences and reactions that individual officers will have. It must be noted first and foremost that one of the most important assets a department can offer an officer throughout reintegration is access to mental health resources. This asset was mentioned in the above solution, so it will be largely passed over here. One important change that should be made in departments and agencies nationwide are the conditions surrounding time off, regardless of whether it is paid or unpaid. Upon returning from an undercover operation, officers will often be battling a slew of emotions and possibly other mental health problems. Presently officer requests for time off due to mental health reasons are more likely to be declined than for a tangible, physical injury (Farkas, 1986). Thus, departments must assess their policies regarding time off and make the necessary amendments in order to allow officers in mental distress to take the necessary time off. To have an officer performing their day-to-day duties while in mental distress can be a danger to both the officer themselves and the public. While this adjustment may be difficult for many understaffed departments to make, the overall public and officers' safety must be taken into consideration when determining if it is a worthwhile change. If a department or agency chooses to enact this change, it is important for them to collect data and routinely assess the effectiveness of the applied solution. Of

course, not all departments will respond equally to such a change, so it is to be expected that additional adjustments will have to be made along the way. To assess the effectiveness of this solution, the department or agency should use a survey to collect data from the officers. This survey should be anonymous and required by all officers within the department. The data collected should focus primarily on the officer's reasoning(s) for taking time off, as well as the duration of their leave, and whether the officers personally felt they were more effective on the job following mental health leave or not. The department should also look at statistical data to notice any changes in the public's perception of police officers, the use of force reports, and any other officer conduct-related data being collected. Such data will allow the department to assess not only if the officers are perceiving the changes to be effective but if the department as a whole is operating more effectively as a result of the adjustment.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this research demonstrate that there are significant consequences that result from undercover police operations. The two primary consequences shown in this study are psychological effects and reintegration complications. Training programs that lacked sufficient length and content appear to be at least one of the underlying causes as well as the overarching nature of undercover operations (i.e., abandoning one's life and adopting another). While there is sufficient evidence to prove the existence of

negative effects of undercover police operations, such operations are too crucial to the criminal justice system to discard altogether. Thus, this study focuses on solutions that can make undercover operations safer for the officers involved. The solutions presented in this study include longer training programs and required, additional supplemental training through outside sources; dismantling the mental health stigma in law enforcement and implementing mental health resources for officers; and allowing officers to take time off in order to recover and heal from mental health problems. These solutions are reiterated through Macleod's statement, which beautifully summarizes the importance of implementing procedures that would improve the undercover officer's experiences:

Casualties will occur in dangerous and stressful environments, but their frequency and severity might be able to be reduced not only by good selection, but also by adequate field training, an efficient and competent operator and operation, and early detection and treatment of those struggling or overtly symptomatic (1995).

The findings in this study indicate that there are available alternatives and solutions for departments and agencies to take advantage of that would prevent unnecessary, additional harm for many undercover officers. Of course, each department and agency has individual needs; however, the solutions presented are not mutually exclusive. A

department or agency's statistics may not indicate a need for additional mental health resources, but they may need improved training for their undercover officers. It is by design that departments will be able to use the solutions that would provide the most benefit to their individual needs. It is also important for departments to continuously monitor and assess the conditions within their department to determine if additional minor adjustments or larger changes need to be made. Law enforcement exists within an environment that is constantly evolving; thus, the departments, agencies, and officers must evolve alongside the environment.

Due to the nature of undercover operations, it is important to recognize that the results of this research will not be able to be applied universally to all departments and agencies nationwide. There are numerous variables that can impact the effectiveness of the proposed solutions. Undercover operations vary in length and intensity, thus impacting officers differently on a case-by-case basis. The characteristics of the individual officer and particular operation will, therefore, create unique reactions from those involved. Some officers may react strongly to their time undercover, while others may hardly react at all, or it may take officers years to react and develop the effects of their operation. The atmosphere and surrounding environment of a department or agency will also impact the effectiveness of the proposed solutions. Larger departments and agencies may have greater resources to enact a greater scope of changes, whereas a smaller

department may have greater budget constraints that prevent them from implementing such changes. It is also possible that smaller departments and agencies will have a decreased need to implement such extensive changes. Departments and agencies that service smaller, rural communities may not have a need for undercover operations or use them rarely. If the latter is the case, it is still important that officers are trained properly for undercover operations. However, if a department has never performed an undercover operation, it would be safe to pass over the undercover training recommendation. Implementing mental health resources and targeting the mental health stigma, though, is necessary regardless of whether a department uses undercover operations or not. Again, the solutions derived from this research aim to guide the departments or agencies toward improvement while leaving room for customization.

## **Recommendations**

While the amount of research conducted relating to this topic has increased over the years, there is still a limited amount of data available. Most of the research conducted on this topic took place in the late 1900s. This is out of a modern range, but it is a sensible problem due to the development and evolution of undercover policing that primarily occurred during the 1970s and 1980s. Another contributor to the lack of both quantitative and qualitative data is the ever-present mental health stigma looming within the law enforcement community. As long as officers fear retaliation from superiors and feel

shame at the prospect of declaring they are struggling, there will be a continual fight for accurate data regarding psychological disorders within law enforcement. While the current lack of modern research and data is unfortunate, the data retrieved from the earlier research articles still applies within the modern context. However, there is still an incredible need for greater research to be done regarding the training of undercover police officers to determine if additional ways can increase the effectiveness of the training procedures. Quantifiable data sources must be found in order to support the arguments for and against proposed improvements and policy changes. Much of this data can be sourced from departments and agencies that choose to implement the solutions proposed in this study. Departments and agencies who take action should also plan to administer the assessments mentioned in order to collect quantitative data. This data can later be analyzed to determine the effectiveness of the solutions and how variables such as department size and duration of the undercover operation impact the results. Further research on the psychological effects of undercover policing and the various resolutions is also necessary, as there have been conflicting findings in the past. A greater understanding of the consequences of undercover operations will yield solutions and improvements within the selection process, training procedures, and reintegration policies—solutions that can better help the officers involved.

## Conclusion

Law enforcement officers routinely make sacrifices on behalf of the public they serve, even more so for undercover officers. In many cases, undercover officers willingly sacrifice time with their families, their routines, and the known and accounted-for dangers of traditional police work. All of this is for the sake of justice—and yet, so often it goes unnoticed. Not only do these undercover officers sacrifice their “normal” in order to serve in undercover operations, but they risk exposure to a slew of psychological troubles. Many of the psychological side effects of undercover operations are recognized by scholars in both the law enforcement and psychology disciplines; however, law enforcement leadership seems to be taking little action to protect and defend undercover officers in any way they can. This study has sought to demonstrate that the further development of training and preparation policies for officers participating in undercover operations will alleviate resulting negative psychological effects. By studying the current literature and limited data available, it is clear to see that nationwide improvements in training procedures would benefit undercover officers. By preparing them more thoroughly for their time undercover, officers receive both practical and psychological help.

Additionally this study aimed to determine ways to better manage the negative psychological effects that result from undercover operations. Based on what is known from current literature, this study found three additional

ways in which these effects can be better managed: dismantling the stigma surrounding mental health services within law enforcement settings; improving policies to make an array of mental health services openly available to officers; and implementing reintegration specific procedures to assist undercover officers with their reentry into society. Ideally these improvements to department culture and functioning will create more opportunities for undercover officers to seek help following an operation if necessary and, as a result, decrease the lasting psychological impact of undercover operations.

Assessments are recommended for each individual solution that a department or agency chooses to implement. These assessments include surveys to determine officers’ perspectives on the changes, whether they are viewed as a net positive or negative. Other recommended assessments include collecting and analyzing quantitative data to determine if the changes made have modified officer productivity, performance, or conduct in any ways. These assessments should take place routinely, either every six months or annually, depending on the needs and resources available to the department or agency. It is also recommended that additional modifications to the implemented solutions be made if the assessment results indicate that changes may be necessary. It is important to remember every department and agency will have different needs to be met and different challenges based on staffing and the areas they serve;

thus, the recommended solutions should be viewed as a starting point with the department or agency making improvements as needed.

While this study has made headway regarding the issue of undercover operations' psychological effects, there is still a critical need for further research to be done on the topic. Current literature lacks the benefits that recent quantitative data on the occurrence of negative psychological effects would provide, as well as data to reflect the effectiveness of the proposed solutions. Future research should focus primarily on developing the quantitative data and investigating other forms of qualitative research including but not limited to interviews, ethnography, and surveys. Departments and agencies choosing to implement the proposed solutions will also ideally conduct internal assessments. Such assessments are designed to produce both qualitative and quantitative data; the data yielded from the assessments may be used as sources for future research and developments. These varying forms of data collection will allow for future developments of policies, procedures, and practices in law enforcement.

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