"THE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL HAS BEEN PERMANENTLY SHUT OFF"

Work-Role Overload Among U.S. Police

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The functional breadth of the police role is a primary issue facing law enforcement. However, few empirical data examine how officers are experiencing an occupational environment characterized by an increasingly wider range of new (but routine) duties. I take a qualitative approach to explore experiences of work-role overload via in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a sample of U.S. police officers ($N = 48$). By applying the framework for thematic analysis, I find that work-role overload is a robust feature of police officers' occupational experiences and presents in two ways: (a) through quantitative overload related to the excessive volume of work demands and (b) qualitative overload related to strained or diminished psychological resources. The findings provide valuable insights for improving the theoretical understanding of work-role overload among police in light of international trends toward broadening law enforcement's social functions and add to contemporary discussions to "defund the police."

Keywords: police; law enforcement; qualitative methods; policing; criminal justice system

The controversial death of George Floyd at the hand of police (Hill et al., 2020) and the ensuing movement to "defund the police" (Searcey, 2020) have put the expansive nature of the police function at the forefront of U.S. sociopolitical discussion. The mounting calls by activists and policy makers to reallocate police funding to other areas of need, such as social and mental health services, must be juxtaposed with a long-standing trend toward the expansion of the police role. Today's police are not only performing traditional crime control and order maintenance duties. They are also explicitly tasked with engaging in proactive nonenforcement activities as part of community policing reforms (Jiao, 1998), addressing extensive administrative duties and incorporating significant technological changes related to their work (e.g., body cameras; Koper et al., 2014; Manning, 1992).

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Moreover, the deinstitutionalization movement and contemporaneous drops in funding for social and mental health services have put officers on the frontline of crisis response that previously would not have come under their purview (Engel & Silver, 2001; Teplin & Pruett, 1992). In fact, the continued functional expansion of the police role has been identified as a primary issue facing U.S. law enforcement (Crank et al., 2010), with officers routinely responsible for a wide range of duties that have increased their overall workload and, critically, also fundamentally shifted the nature of their responsibilities (Hickman & Reaves, 2006). Similar trends, particularly the expansion of the social function of law enforcement, have also been observed internationally, for example, in the United Kingdom and Canada (Institute for Canadian Urban Research Studies, 2014; Millie, 2013).

Despite an acknowledgment that the police function is expansive, questions about how officers perceive their work demands have been underexamined. However, understanding officers' experiences of managing competing role demands is critical to determining whether officers' organizational environments reflect the functional expansion of the police role and adequately support officers in performing new (but routine) professional demands safely, effectively, and confidently.

The purpose of this study is to understand how police officers' occupational environments, particularly the expansive nature of their duties, may elicit experiences of work-role overload, a type of strain related to the constraints preempting an individual's role fulfillment. To examine this issue, I leverage qualitative interview methods to identify officer-perceived antecedents of work-role overload among U.S. police officers ($N = 48$), representing a range of organizational settings and backgrounds.

WORK-ROLE OVERLOAD

One way to conceptualize challenges related to navigating competing work demands is through role strain.[1] Role strain is "the felt difficulty in fulfilling role obligations" (Goode, 1960, p. 483). Due to its emphasis on understanding the interplay between various roles individuals may hold, role strain intuitively lends itself as a framework for examining officers' experiences as they navigate multiple aspects of their occupation. Overall, role strain has been associated with a host of negative outcomes, including poorer physical and psychological well-being and worse professional outcomes (Bowling et al., 2015; Elloy & Smith, 2003; Griffin & McMahon, 2013; Jayaratne, 1993; Kahn et al., 1964; Kath et al., 2013; Örtqvist & Wincent, 2006). In studies of the professional experiences of police officers, different types of role strain (i.e., role conflict and role ambiguity) have been used as a framework to examine the challenge of balancing work and home roles (e.g., Duxbury & Halinski, 2018; Griffin & Sun, 2018; Joseph & Nagarajamurthy, 2014; Karaffa et al., 2015; Youngcourt & Huffman, 2005) and the impact of organizational demands on officers (Brough & Williams, 2007; Brown & Campbell, 1990; Brown et al., 1999). However, scholars agree (Duxbury et al., 2015; Ricciardelli, 2018) that little research has investigated police officers' experiences of work-role demands and the ensuing domain-specific role overload that they may navigate as part of their professional function.

Role overload occurs when an individual lacks the resources or capacities necessary to successfully and confidently fulfill a role (Creary & Gordon, 2016). Many adverse outcomes are associated with work-role overload, including worse physical and mental health, decreased satisfaction with family and work lives, and poorer professional outcomes

(Duxbury et al., 2008). While there is a large literature on police stress, the construct of work-role overload has been overlooked in academic research on law enforcement (Duxbury et al., 2015). Moreover, within this small literature, the predominating focus has been on the consequences of role overload, such as increased stress (Biggam et al., 1997; Brown & Campbell, 1990; Duxbury & Halinski, 2018; Kop et al., 1999), rather than its antecedents. In addition, much of the research that does address causes of officers' role overload was completed prior to the organizational changes that increased fiscal pressure on police agencies (Gascón, 2010) and expanded officers' roles (e.g., Davidson & Veno, 1980; Kroes, 1985).

A notable exception to this trend is research on work-role overload from Canada (Duxbury et al., 2015; Duxbury & Halinski, 2018; Ricciardelli, 2018). In a series of studies, Duxbury and colleagues examined the causes of work-role overload among Canadian public safety personnel (PSP) as well as total role overload related to managing work and home roles. Regarding PSP's professional experiences, specifically, Duxbury et al. (2015) found that factors such as competing demands, pressures to perform work outside one's mandate, understaffing, and a non-supportive organizational culture increase work-role overload.

Although there are reasons to expect that work-role overload may constitute similarly in Canada and the United States due to cultural and social parallels, there are structural differences between the countries' police forces. For example, the Canadian police service comprises less than 300 agencies; officers enact a single federal criminal code; and training, police practices, and investigative policies are standardized across the country (Cheatham & Maizland, 2020; Conor et al., 2018). In the United States, on the contrary, the police force is decentralized and includes more than 18,000 agencies that are guided by localized training requirements, resources, policies, and procedures (Walker & Katz, 2005). For this reason, U.S. police officers' experiences of overload may arise for different reasons and be acutely shaped by their organizational contexts.

It is also critical to note that Duxbury et al. (2015) define role overload as the circumstances in which an individual does "not hav[e] enough time or energy" to meet organizational demands (p. 932). As such, they focus on adverse effects related to the quantity of officers' work responsibilities and the pressures created by a greater number of duties. This focus on quantitative role overload is representative of the larger body of research on work-role overload, regardless of the sample. For example, surveys used to measure role overload generally (e.g., Beehr et al., 1976; Bolino & Turnley, 2005), and among law enforcement specifically (e.g., Lambert et al., 2007), tend to focus on perceptions of time constraints, the volume of responsibilities, or hours worked. In some cases, role overload was measured using single items, preempting a nuanced understanding of how overload is constituted (Biggam et al., 1997; Brown & Campbell, 1990). However, U.S. police officers are managing an increase in the overall work burden in terms of both the volume and the nature of duties they must address (Friedman, 2020). For this reason, officers may perceive overload in two distinct ways—quantitatively, related to the sheer volume of work demands they are charged to address under strict time constraints (Beehr, 1976), and qualitatively, related to officers' capacity to effectively and confidently address the range of demands placed upon them, based on their skills, knowledge, and supports (French et al., 1982).

While qualitative role overload has not been used as a framework to examine the experiences of law enforcement, there is preliminary evidence for such a process. Specifically, Ricciardelli (2018) found that resource constraints in rural police agencies not only led to

role overload due to increased workloads but also precipitated "psychological turmoil" related to feelings of risk by changing the nature of officers' professional experiences (p. 430).

CURRENT STUDY

The functional breadth of the police role provides reason to expect that role overload may be a robust feature of U.S. police work. While this study assumes that work-role overload is a part of police officers' professional experiences, I aimed to privilege officers' subjective perceptions of overload by taking an exploratory qualitative approach to identify the antecedents of domain-specific role overload related officers' work demands. Qualitative approaches are generally underrepresented in the area of policing and criminal justice (Jenkins, 2015), but some scholars have argued that qualitative methods are more effective for developing knowledge because of its emphasis on meaning and concepts within dynamic environments (Tewksbury, 2009). Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, I firmly ground my findings in the experiences and realities of the individuals who perform law enforcement duties (Engel & Whalen, 2010), thereby affording an opportunity for officers to provide their perspectives on challenges related to the expansive nature of their duties. Moreover, I take an essentialist/realist orientation that assumes a direct relationship between meaning and experience (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). In short, my analysis aims to reflect perceptions of work-role overload as interpreted by participants themselves. In this way, I am able to explore officers' views of work-role overload without the constraints of prior assumptions inherent to the construct's conceptualization. Specifically, to flexibly accommodate the different ways in which officers may perceive overload, I expand Duxbury et al. (2015) conceptualization of work-role overload based on Kahn et al.'s (1964) original view that role overload occurs when role demands are overwhelming relative to all available resources.

METHOD

The qualitative data were collected as part of a larger study on police officers' professional experiences. Purposive sampling was used to recruit 48 U.S. police officers representing diverse demographic, professional, and organizational profiles.[2] As there is currently no resource facilitating the systematic recruitment of police officers from the national pool of officers, participants were recruited strategically using network-based sampling leveraging multiple "starting points" (Heckathorn, 1997), which has been shown to be effective for criminal justice-related research (Champion, 2006).[3] To ensure adequate representation of officers from a variety of organizational settings and personal backgrounds, all potential participants completed a survey that was used to stratify the sample based on officer-reported agency size and demographics.[4] Table 1 displays the overall characteristics of the sample.

Data were collected via in-depth, audio-recorded interviews. All but one interview was held by phone conference; I noted no discernible differences between interview types. Officers provided verbal informed consent to participate in the study and all agreed to be audio-recorded. Interview length was principally determined by each participant's willingness to go into detail in their responses (average: 2:14 hr). Interviews were guided by a

TABLE 1: Sample Characteristics

Variable	*N* = 48
Age (in years), mean (*SD*)	39.27 (10.45)
Years of service (in years), mean (*SD*)	14.31 (8.94)
Gender, *n* (%)	
Male	34 (71%)
Female	14 (29%)
Racial/ethnic group, *n* (%)	
White	27 (56%)
Black/African American	3 (6%)
Hispanic	9 (19%)
Asian	5 (10%)
Biracial/bi-ethnic	4 (8%)
Rank, *n* (%)	
Patrol officer/deputy/trooper	23 (48%)
CID/criminal investigations	15 (31%)
Supervisory ranks	10 (21%)
Agency type, *n* (%)	
Local police department	39 (81%)
Sheriff's office	5 (10%)
State agency	4 (8%)
Agency size, *n* (%)	
<99 sworn officers	14 (29%)
100-249 officers	6 (13%)
250-999 officers	11 (23%)
1,000+ officers	17 (35%)
Jurisdiction type, *n* (%)	
Rural	6 (12%)
Suburban	10 (21%)
Urban	26 (54%)
Mixed	6 (12%)

semi-structured protocol designed to gain a holistic sense of officers' professional experiences. The first set of questions assessed their occupational environment, including their job-related duties and organizational and community contexts. Participants' appraisal of their workload and perceptions of competing demands were explicitly addressed. Officers were also asked about routine challenges and high-stress events they have experienced, how they managed each, and how their agency supported them in doing so. Finally, officers elaborated on meaningful aspects of their jobs, positive interactions with the public, and involvement in community policing.

After each interview, I wrote detailed notes to reflect on interview content and engage with evolving themes across interviews. All recordings were transcribed and deidentified by research assistants (RAs). The data were then examined in accordance with Miles et al. (2020), leveraging two coding processes: (a) conceptual and emergent coding and (b) pattern coding.

I developed a blended inductive/deductive coding strategy along with a team of six graduate RAs using the general framework for thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006). We started with an a priori master code for experiences of "role overload." Coders applied this code to any explicit statements or anecdotes indicating a feeling of being overextended

TABLE 2: Work-Role Overload Related to the Functional Breadth of Police Work

Theme	Category
Quantitative role overload related to the pressures of excessive work volume	High call volume/caseloads and associated administrative loads
	Assignment of duties ancillary to officers' primary work responsibilities
	Temporary workload increases related to major events
Qualitative role overload related to strained or diminished psychological resources	Prioritizing multiple, high-priority, or urgent responsibilities
	Precipitating effective responses to vulnerable individuals
	Impact of critical incidents

by role demands for any reason. The goal of "chunking" the data in this way was to (a) provide sufficient flexibility to broadly capture all types of experiences of role overload without being constrained by prior assumptions about the causes of such overload and (b) allow for nuanced subcategories of role overload to emerge directly from officers' narratives. The team of coders was trained in the proper application of the master code over several training cycles in which the same sample of transcripts was independently coded. I then checked intercoder agreement for each transcript, identified discrepancies, and provided written and verbal feedback to coders to clarify disagreements on the application of the codes. Finally, the data were divided among the graduate RAs and independently coded. Coding was completed in MaxQDA (VERBI Software, 2018). I reviewed all coded transcripts to confirm consistency, and discrepancies were resolved through team consensus using an iterative process and regular research team meetings (Hill et al., 2005).

Following the application of the master code, I pattern coded all coded segments to identify themes (Miles et al., 2020). I was guided by the goal of providing a rich thematic description of the entire data set. As such, I examined each of 232 segments coded for role overload. Coded segments derived from three sources: (a) officers' responses to explicit questions about their work demands and perceptions of overload (e.g., Do you feel that the amount of work you're expected to do is reasonable?); (b) overarching perceptions of routine stressors encountered in police work (e.g., What aspects of the job are stressful for you?); and (c) officers' spontaneously generated anecdotes highlighting difficulties presented by work demands. Each coded segment was annotated with a preliminary subcategory identifying the officer-perceived antecedent of role overload. Then, all subcategories were examined for patterns by clustering them into broader conceptual themes. Conceptual themes were refined until all subcategories were adequately captured and represented.

FINDINGS

The pervasiveness of work-role overload shapes many aspects of officers' professional experiences. Emergent themes showed that overload is perceived in two distinct ways, through (a) quantitative role overload related to an excessive volume of work demands and (b) qualitative role overload related to strained or diminished psychological resources. Each of the themes and its constituent categories are provided in Table 2. Of course, multiple themes and categories of work-role overload may characterize officers' experiences at any time, and each of the categories has the potential to interact with others, thereby compounding the pressures on officers as they navigate their responsibilities. Findings pertaining to

work-role overload are elaborated below. Next, features of the organizational context that precipitate work-role overload are considered. Participants are designated by the abbreviation "Ofc." (i.e., officer) and the number of their interview.[5]

QUANTITATIVE ROLE OVERLOAD RELATED TO COMPETING DEMANDS

Consistent with previous literature, managing a large volume of competing demands is the primary driver of quantitative work-role overload. Chronic excessive workloads accrue based on high call volume/caseloads and associated administrative loads and the assignment of duties ancillary to officers' primary work role. Moreover, temporary workload increases related to serious incidents may further compound such pressures. Participants feel that competing demands make it difficult to address all work demands efficiently and to the standard they desire. Particularly notable is officers' perception that at least some of the burden of their workload relates to greater service expectations by the public, resulting in high numbers of low-level calls for service, a finding that has not previously been elaborated.

High Call Volume/Caseloads and Associated Administrative Burdens

For patrol officers, role overload is driven by a workload characterized by a high volume of dispatched calls for service. Many officers remark that they often begin their shift with a backlog of calls requiring response: "You can come out of roll call and the dispatcher's calling you. . . to like 'hurry up, hurry up, like, get in your car, let's go'" (Ofc. 22). In some cases, because of resource constraints, the rurality of a jurisdiction, or trends in local crime, high workloads are a permanent feature of officers' occupational experiences defining their entire shift: "From the time I mark in to the time I mark out, I'm of course, to a degree, a slave to the radio" (Ofc. 3). Similarly, for detectives, the primary driver of role overload is a high caseload, which often leads them to feel that they cannot devote as much attention and energy to each case as they desire.

The volume of calls and cases is directly associated with the administrative loads officers carry: "I mean, every job we go to, every radio run we go to, it generates paperwork. So, the amount of paper we do is just endless" (Ofc. 6). Officers also feel that detailed reports are vital to their work and therefore require much attention and care: "The judge wasn't there. The jury wasn't there. The grand jury wasn't there. The prosecutors weren't there. So, all they can go off of is your report. And, to do a proper report takes time, takes detail" (Ofc. 13). In general, officers voice more frustration with overload related to administrative work compared to other aspects of their function: "The reports were what killed you, not really the calls" (Ofc. 1).

Due to the need for record-keeping, officers overwhelmingly prioritize administrative duties after call response. However, in an environment where "you're bouncing from call to call to call," [administrative work] "keeps getting in the way" (Ofc. 13). Officers may skip lunch breaks or work overtime simply to meet the administrative requirements of their work: "I've had [times where] my lunch break is only consisting of catching up on reports. Or you. . .might have to do them at the end of the day, after shift's over" (Ofc. 43). Factors that can amplify perceptions of overload related to administrative burdens include the nature of specific incidents and poorly implemented administrative procedures.

Critically, officers perceive that call and case volumes (along with associated administrative duties) have increased as the public's service expectations have shifted over time, resulting in many service calls that officers deem low priority. Officers resoundingly comment on the expansive nature of their function: "We have to deal with everything" (Ofc. 11); and remark on the public's overall reliance on police services: "The community needs so much, and so much of what the community needs falls on the police department" (Ofc. 40). Moreover, officers' narratives are rife with accounts of low-priority, civil matters that result in service calls. The general perception that the public calls the police for "a lot of nonsense that is not warranted by the police to respond" (Ofc. 38) is repeated frequently and causes much frustration for officers who "get a lot of BS calls where it's not a police matter. . . [community members] call the police for everything" (Ofc. 45). Officers anecdotally describe situations in which they are called to resolve minor verbal disagreements, chide children who refuse to go to school, look for lost pets, or even open attic doors and address complaints about a neighbor's errant grass clippings. In short, "[w]hen people don't know what to do, they call the police" (Ofc. 39).

While high call volume may reflect a broader shift in public expectations for police services, this shift may also be reflected in agencies' directives. For example, in some jurisdictions, by policy, *any* call for service is dispatched to an officer, regardless of how mundane: "Doesn't matter what it is, [if you're] calling and requesting an officer, you're gonna get one" (Ofc. 35). Similarly, detectives point to changes in the threshold for which cases are investigated: ". . .you know, ten years ago, if you had someone break in your car, we just gave you a report number. Now, we're investigating those." He continues: "I think, honestly, it's just the future of law enforcement" (Ofc. 34).

Assignment of Duties Ancillary to Officers' Primary Work Role

Some officers' workloads extend beyond their primary role to include ancillary duties. Officers described acting as liaisons to community groups, housing associations, and schools; car seat safety technicians; academy instructors and field training officers; mental health peer support; union stewards; gang and drug resistance educators; and liaison officers who facilitate information-sharing related to federal counterterrorism efforts or manage the procurement of surplus federal equipment. Notably, many of these ancillary duties are opted into voluntarily by officers who value the opportunities they present or feel they can improve the functioning of their agency by doing so. For example, one officer volunteered to take on the task of designing his agency's patrol cars because he had become frustrated that this work was "done by an administrator who hasn't driven a squad car for several years and is never gonna drive one. . .[and] things aren't being done the way we need them to be done" (Ofc. 41). In fact, the same officer had accumulated many ancillary duties over his career; however, when he voiced the need to step back from those duties, that transition was not readily accepted or facilitated by supervisors, leaving the officer to have to convince other volunteers to take on those duties.

Temporary Workload Increases Related to Major Events

A majority of officers acknowledge the erratic nature of calls for service (and associated administrative loads) such that an otherwise manageable workload can be interspersed with

periods of unusually high activity. However, at times, the nature of particular incidents may temporarily amplify work-role overload, a situation that may be more likely in smaller agencies and rural contexts. For example, a particularly serious crime can divert a large number of officers away from regular call response, thereby increasing the volume of calls that remaining officers have to address: "It's one call, but now we have half the shift there, or the entire shift" (Ofc. 20). Similarly, a high-profile incident or a complex crime scene may create temporary pressures on investigative units. In addition to affecting the numbers of available officers, the serious nature of an incident may also increase the need for record-keeping. Mental health calls, scenes with injuries, or interactions resulting in force or arrest multiply the paperwork officers must produce. A state trooper investigating fatal car wrecks said of the documentation he has to compile for each of his cases: "My goodness, the paperwork. Everything has got to be documented, everything is on paper. A traffic homicide case might have been stitched like a book" (Ofc. 7).

Critical incidents resulting in injury or death of an officer may similarly increase workloads on a short-term basis. For example, line-of-duty deaths require continued regular operations while planning funeral and memorial services, supporting the officer's family, and providing resources to affected coworkers. A supervisor in a state agency described his overload in the aftermath of an incident that claimed three lives:

> I basically went for about four days with maybe two hours of sleep a day. I was managing my daily activities with work because business had to continue, managing the community, managing the troops. . .Setting up the funerals. . .spending time with the families. It just had me going in every different direction. (Ofc. 36)

At times, an agency's officers may also be pulled into assisting a nearby agency in the aftermath of a line of duty death or other critical incidents.

QUALITATIVE ROLE OVERLOAD RELATED TO STRAINED OR DIMINISHED PSYCHOLOGICAL RESOURCES

While role overload related to work volume is a prominent experience among officers, they also describe perceptions of qualitative role overload resulting from strained or diminished psychological resources. Specifically, officers may perceive overload related to the high-stakes decision-making required when managing multiple, co-occurring high-priority responsibilities and precipitating effective responses to vulnerable individuals in a context of inadequate training or resources. Moreover, officers' psychological capacity to meet their work demands may be severely hampered in the aftermath of critical incidents when their mental health is strained, leading to feelings of being overloaded.

Prioritizing Multiple High-Priority or Urgent Responsibilities

Workloads that put into conflict the range of officers' work responsibilities without consideration to time constraints are a major source of quantitative role overload. However, when competing demands are all considered high-priority and urgent, role overload may be felt qualitatively. In such cases, officers may feel at the limits of their capacities and training and are not confident in the high-stakes decisions they have to undertake. In some agencies, when high-priority calls compete, dispatch or supervisors determine the urgency of each

call; however, most officers describe situations where they are charged with prioritizing calls themselves, typically considering "whichever fire is burning the hottest" (Ofc. 17). Of course, officers develop strategies for navigating such demands, for example, by creating informal hierarchies for call response. However, prioritizing urgent calls is not always straightforward, and can get "iffy," at which point "you just kind of have to gauge with experience" (Ofc. 48). At times, it seems "like everything comes in at once and you just kind of got to . . . triage what you got" (Ofc. 42). Such situations are "very overwhelming . . . how do you prioritize? That case you can't really prioritize. You got to just, you know, do your best and . . . kind of hope for the best . . . Hope everything works out" (Ofc. 6). The confounding decisions officers may be required to make when serious situations compete for response is exemplified by one anecdote: ". . . once I left a domestic because there was a gun call on the other side of the city. So, you know, it's kind of weird because you think, 'Oh, you wouldn't want to leave a domestic'" (Ofc. 16).

Detectives may similarly perceive qualitative work-role overload when investigating multiple high-priority cases and they feel that they cannot devote as much attention and energy to each as they want to: "[A]t some point . . . you have to just say, 'Okay, you have to put this [high-priority] case down and move to the next one . . .' because those other cases need your attention, too; because those other people need your attention, too" (Ofc. 40). Officers may be pushed to prioritize high-profile cases to the point where lower priority cases simply do not receive the attention they deserve: "We weren't able to do what we needed to do [for our other cases]" (Ofc. 2). Under such circumstances, detectives are unable to perform their duties to the standards they wish, which is very frustrating and even distressing, especially for officers who feel emotionally attached to their work:

> . . . it's just overwhelming . . . you wanna devote so much time and effort to a single case or to help someone or something like that, and you end up having to really prioritize certain things just because otherwise you'd get bogged down. (Ofc. 18)

Precipitating Effective Responses to Vulnerable Individuals With Inadequate Resources

Another aspect of qualitative work-role overload pertains to idiosyncratic psychological processes that add pressure to officers' work experiences. Overall, the psychological burden officers feel is related to the pressures of having "people's lives depend on you . . . [and] their well-being in the future, you know, based on the actions that you take at the time" (Ofc. 5). Moreover, this burden is felt particularly acutely in environments that do not support officers to effectively address the needs of their public counterparts. For example, officers who work to respond to the needs of vulnerable individuals (e.g., individuals with mental illness and child victims) describe the feeling that the stakes of their decision-making are very high and have the potential to carry meaningful negative outcomes for the community member. For example, a female officer in a mental health unit elaborated:

> . . . if I don't handle this correctly, one of these people are going to fall through the cracks. Somebody is going to not get the treatment that they need . . . I take this responsibility . . . I hold this job close to my heart . . . I'm trying to do the best that I can, given the circumstance. So, when you have four things going on and you want to give the best to each one. . .the responsibility of the task . . . adds to [the overload]. (Ofc. 44)

Another officer operating in a severely understaffed rural agency was acting as both the interim chief of police and its sole investigator and describes similar role overload related to addressing the demands of her child abuse cases. As she is managing her many duties, she feels "consistently and constantly behind." However, regardless of how overburdened she feels, "I make sure my kid cases are taken care of—no matter what's going on. My kid cases come first [because] they need me to do something" (Ofc. 15). Another detective also feels the burden of investigating cases of vulnerable crime victims and put the psychological pressure of this task succinctly: "I took everything more personally because I needed to feel like I've done something good and was doing something well, and put more stress on myself to do that" (Ofc. 25).

Qualitative work-role overload perceived by officers working on behalf of vulnerable members of the public is especially pronounced when officers are unable to affect the outcomes that they envision. Some officers feel that they have never been adequately trained to respond to the types of crisis situations that are now a routine part of police work: "You're asking somebody that's never been trained, that has had no classes on counseling, social work, psychology, any of those things—but, all of the sudden, all of those things get dropped on your lap every day" (Ofc. 40).

Moreover, broader structural failures may similarly impede officers' ability to address such situations. Officers are often aware of the broader systemic issues that prevent them from addressing their work responsibilities effectively and voice significant frustration with the wider justice and mental health systems with which they interact. They describe the systems as ineffective and inefficient, making it difficult for them to perform their duties in a way that makes communities safer and helps improve lives. For example, officers responding to individuals experiencing a mental health crisis may try to link them to appropriate services but overall feel that such community-based services are inadequate and ill-equipped to provide lasting improvements. In one example, an officer recounts bringing a community member in crisis to the hospital "because they're a danger to themselves and others" just to have them "released the next day, and we do it again and again until somebody gets hurt" (Ofc. 48).

The Impact of Critical Incidents

As discussed earlier, critical incidents and other major events result in many logistical challenges that strain agency resources and amplify quantitative role overload. However, officers also face the additional burden of emotionally processing such events while engaging in regular work duties. Two-thirds of participants had been injured at work ($n = 36$), and almost all had experienced a life-threatening situation at work ($n = 43$), had a coworker who had experienced a life-threatening situation at work ($n = 47$), and experienced a line-of-duty death in the course of their career ($n = 41$). Moreover, 21 officers responded to at least one incident where a member of the public was injured or killed that had a lasting and meaningful impact on them. While the adverse effects of role overload on mental health are well-documented, the literature on how poor mental health may in turn impact perceptions of role overload is underexamined. The officers in the sample describe that adverse events were often accompanied by a diminished psychological capacity to perform their work effectively, leading to perceptions of qualitative role overload. For example, one officer

struggled with balancing his own emotional needs with the needs of the public after the line-of-duty death of a former coworker:

> I can't just break down and start crying . . . Like, you're really hurt because you lost a coworker, and it's really, really sentimental but then it's like, "Oh my gosh, I have to do my job which is to be out there trying to help people." So, yeah, it's really tough . . . finding a balance [is] tough to find sometimes. (Ofc. 6)

Other officers described the paralyzing effect of their deteriorating mental health related to the exposure to chronic secondary trauma as they try to fulfill work demands: "I would get stuck in my [patrol] car. I couldn't get out of my fucking car, like, for hours" (Ofc. 25). Another officer felt "emotionally overwhelm[ed]" by his work demands upon returning to work after his involvement in a nonfatal shooting of a community member, saying that he is "still having trouble doing more than one thing at once. And, that multi-tasking ability that I had is gone" (Ofc. 41). Overall, officers perceived a general sense that as their mental health is impacted by major events, critical incidents, and chronic secondary trauma, their capacity to meet work demands deteriorates: "I feel like I really can't handle too much stuff" (Ofc. 1).

Notably, it is likely that the negative impact of adverse events is amplified in small agencies and communities with greater personal links between officers. For example, a coworker's suicide upended the functioning of one department where the entire response was conducted by friends of the victim, including dispatchers, other officers, and medics: "To the employees . . . this was an incredibly traumatic experience . . . it still affects all of us to this day" (Ofc. 15). She illustrates the impaired ability to meet work demands by referencing the dispatcher's inability to take "tough calls" without crying.

INEFFICIENCIES IN THE ORGANIZATIONAL ENVIRONMENT COMPOUND WORK-ROLE OVERLOAD

Officers often invoke the direct compounding effect of ineffective organizational environments in amplifying quantitative and qualitative work-role overload, either by increasing work volume or poorly preparing or supporting officers in addressing their work demands. Quantitative overload is often ascribed to organizational resource constraints, such as understaffing, ineffective coworkers or supervision, and inadequate technology or equipment. Qualitative role overload, on the contrary, is primarily precipitated by misaligned training.

Resource Constraints Are the Primary Drivers of Quantitative Overload

Organizational drivers of quantitative role overload amplify the work burden on officers. For example, understaffing directly increases the call volume or caseload on officers: "We're so understaffed that there's times where . . . we're coming out of roll call and we're 10 calls in a hole. And it's just me and another officer working that area because we don't have enough officers" (Ofc. 45). At times, staffing issues that cause strain for officers are temporary, as officers who are unable to work due to illnesses, injuries, pregnancy, military leave, or training may not be replaced on a short-term basis. Similarly, it takes time to replace an officer who has been promoted away from patrol, resulting in shortages on the

officer's shift. More concerning are chronic staff shortages. For example, understaffing could be the result of high turnover, a string of retirements, the challenge of recruiting new officers (compounded by an onerous recruitment process), low shift minimums, or increased workloads without strategic staffing adjustments. In some cases, a lower staffing level simply becomes the "new normal" when an agency is unable to increase staffing, which has a negative influence on the quality of professional experiences:

> And, a good chunk of that [overload] is just from running short-staffed for an extended period of time. Doing it for a shift or two is really no big deal—somebody takes off Saturday, you just run a little light. But, when you're doing that for four, five months at a time, where nobody can take vacation and nobody can take time off . . . then you're just responding to calls because you're so short staffed. (Ofc. 41)

Notably, as Ofc. 41 mentions, chronic understaffing also leads to a call-driven workload, which then diminishes officers' capacity for discretionary activities.

Similar to understaffing, ineffective coworkers can directly increase pressures on officers by shifting work responsibilities: ". . . as long as everybody's pitching in and doing what they're supposed to be doing, it's manageable. It becomes not manageable . . . when somebody's not pulling their weight" (Ofc. 17). For example, coworkers who are unwilling to work overtime may push overtime duties to a smaller subset of officers. In one particularly extreme case, an officer says he "would routinely work 18 to 20 hours a day . . . because nobody else would work and I just kept working" (Ofc. 25).

While understaffing and ineffective coworkers typically increase work-role overload directly, the quality of supervision heightens perceptions of overload indirectly by amplifying psychological strain as officers aim to fulfill their duties. A particularly frustrating challenge officers face is navigating the pressures imposed by supervisors (and, at times, dispatch) who do not consider officers' time constraints: ". . . we can't be [cleaning graffiti], and taking all these calls that we're supposed to be taking, and making contact with people and checking on the businesses, and doing all this and doing all that" (Ofc. 27). However, more typically, time pressures increase when there is a backlog of calls, leading officers to feel rushed as they perform their work: "You're rushed. You rush calls. You rush reports. You're on a call for more than 30 minutes, your supervisor's getting on the air and is going to ask you: 'Ok, why are you still on that call?'" (Ofc. 45). Other times, officers feel that supervisors are out of touch with the reality of their work and do not effectively support them: "I had a boss who did not understand our workload and kind of poo-pooed what the [domestic violence unit] is . . . he just did not understand, nor appreciate, what the unit was doing" (Ofc. 21). Being ignorant of officers' work duties is especially problematic when the time pressures of supervisors threaten to undermine the quality of officers' activities, increasing perceived safety risks. One emergency services officer recounts an active shooter situation in which his team was charged with securing a building while navigating concurrent demands by higher ranking officials to open up the building: "And that right there is a monster confliction of what everyone in the unit . . . would think would be the right thing to do, and what an executive decides is what he wants to do" (Ofc. 28).

Officers also perceive that inadequate equipment and technology diminish the efficiency by which they can address their duties. For example, one investigator feels that her ability to perform high-quality investigations is regularly impeded by budgetary constraints (Ofc.

5). Another officer describes that her ability to perform routine enforcement duties is severely hampered by inadequate car maintenance. While her department prioritizes the maintenance of patrol cars' appearance, the computers inside the cars are not functional and do not allow her to run license plates, a necessary component of a traffic stop. As such, she is forced to rely on dispatch to provide her with information about the car, which creates friction: "You could call it to 911 . . . [but] you kind of get an attitude if you keep running plates through them" (Ofc. 16).

The challenge of inadequate resources also amplifies work-role overload related to administrative duties. For example, agencies may rely on poorly customized reporting software that includes redundant mandatory prompts:

> . . . you had to fill in the boxes even if it was not applicable. You had to put something in each box. And there would be, say 50 boxes for each report . . . and then, some [boxes] you had to fill in the information and if you were missing information the computer wouldn't let you go through until you did. (Ofc. 20)

In another case, it was only in the previous year that an officer's agency switched to an electronic record-keeping system. Prior to that, multiple paper copies of each report were hand-written: "We used to have to do three different sheets for one incident, and you're writing the . . . exact same on all" (Ofc. 45).

Lack of Specialized Knowledge is the Primary Organizational Driver of Qualitative Overload

Organizational drivers of qualitative role overload increase officers' psychological strain related to meeting specific work demands, most often because officers have not been provided with specialized guidance to meet particular responsibilities. Specifically, when officers are inadequately trained or are operating without the assistance of written policy, they may feel ill-prepared to resolve specific types of situations adequately or confidently, increasing overload. Officers often feel that their training poorly aligns with the realities of their work. In general, the approach to training is seen as unsystematic and disorganized, with several officers describing that the training in their agency, rather than being guided by specific priorities, simply serves to meet mandated minimum requirements. One officer recounts a yearly ritual when her department's administration pushes to complete training requirements:

> It seems like in October, November, December is when the administration will start scrambling and realizing that there's, you know, seven officers that haven't had any training at all this year. And then at that point, they'll throw you in a ridiculous class that really . . . has nothing to do with their jobs . . . It could have been better. (Ofc. 5)

Another officer feels that his agency's goal for training is primarily to "check that box": ". . . the training comes in the form of: 'hey . . . go to your computer and watch this video. Ok. We're done. Yes, we trained them on that'. And that doesn't train anybody" (Ofc. 24).

Officers may be particularly prone to role overload when they transition to specialized units and grapple with new responsibilities, especially when they are poorly trained or there is insufficient expertise to guide them in their new assignment. A detective describes the unusual situation that occurred when most of his agency's Criminal Investigations Division

(CID) left due to a contract dispute. As detective services became virtually nonexistent, resulting in public outcry, nine officers were promoted to CID:

> . . . but none of us had any training whatsoever. And the two guys ahead of us, one was only a year up, so he only had a year experience. The other one has a few years' experience, but, I mean, he's not in a position to be able to train nine new guys. (Ofc. 25)

Notably, in this context the newly minted detective is assigned his first homicide case, just days after his promotion, without having been trained and without significant guidance from more seasoned officers: "I go to the detective bureau, and the overload of information . . . I felt it every day for probably the first year. My head hurt more than normal; it never went off" (Ofc. 25).

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

The decentralized and localized nature of U.S. policing (Walker & Katz, 2005) can make it difficult to identify the big-picture challenges that officers experience across agencies and jurisdictions; yet, my findings suggest that the functional breadth of the police role may be one such challenge. It is notable that experiences of role overload are found across different officer groups and organizational settings, increasing confidence that the processes outlined here lend themselves to a wider theoretical understanding of officers' experiences of the expansive nature of police work. This work represents a significant extension of the literature on work-role overload among police and raises critical considerations for contemporary discussions on the purpose of the police function, particularly in light of calls to "defund the police."

There is evidence from Canada that navigating competing work demands can cause strain for officers; my findings show that such strain is also a robust feature of U.S. policing. Yet, by grounding this study in the perceptions of officers, I find that the predominating framing of work-role overload—which stresses quantitative conceptualizations related to work volume and time pressures—may not adequately capture all experiences of overload. Work-role overload may also be driven by situations in which officers are charged with making high-stakes decisions that have the potential to carry a notable human cost, often in environments that do not provide sufficient resources and training to undertake such decisions optimally. Moreover, impaired mental health related to the traumas unique to police work may result in diminished psychological resources that amplify perceptions of role overload. Taken together, the findings suggest that future research on role overload among law enforcement should assess quantitative and qualitative work-role overload as distinct constructs (French & Caplan, 1972) to best inform interventions that diminish overload. It is notable that qualitative work-role overload is generally underexamined, even among other professional samples, and these findings should prompt scholars interested in the construct to more explicitly distinguish these subtypes.

Moreover, it is critical to acknowledge the prominent role officers' organizational environment plays in eliciting different types of role overload. Resource constraints create inefficient occupational environments, and ill-conceived training may not adequately prepare officers for the realities of their work. Moreover, limited mental health support or mental health resources that are not perceived as accessible (Haugen et al., 2017; Hofer & Savell,

2021) may leave officers unsupported in dealing with the mental health challenges presented by police work, leading to diminished capacities for dealing with work demands.

While there is strong evidence for organizational influences on officers' perceptions of role overload, a limitation of this study is the fact that I did not attempt to contrast officers' experiences of work-role overload based on agency size or jurisdiction type. However, there is some evidence that role overload is experienced in unique ways in smaller rural agencies (Ricciardelli, 2018). Moreover, a recent overview of the policies and procedures of U.S. police agencies shows that annual operating budgets, required training hours, and the availability of written policies and procedural directives are inversely related to agency size (Brooks, 2020). As such, smaller, rural agencies have fewer resources and may be less able to prepare and support officers to engage in their work optimally. Future work should aim to untangle the disparate ways in which agency size and jurisdiction type may figure in officers' experiences of work-role overload.

There are only two possible solutions to mitigating experiences of work-role overload—either by (a) reducing the demands placed on officers or (b) by increasing officers' capacities and resources to confidently meet those demands. The appropriate response will in large part depend upon a critical reevaluation of the functional breadth of U.S. policing. At the core of this issue is a larger societal consideration: What should be the function of police? Are there duties that have been absorbed into the police function which would be best redirected to other service providers and agencies (e.g., "low-level civil matters" and social welfare functions)? Recent work has advocated for a broad realignment of the police function (Vitale, 2017), a consideration that has entered mainstream sociopolitical discussion with calls to "defund the police." However, the prominence of recent protests should also be juxtaposed with officers' overarching view that substantive changes to how the public perceives the police function have lowered the threshold for engaging police services. There is some evidence supporting officers' perceptions. For example, research on the economics of policing has found that only about 20% of calls for police service are crime-related (Demers et al., 2007; Walker & Katz, 2005; Wuschke et al., 2018). It is possible that the advent of community policing and other democratic policing initiatives has precipitated a paradigmatic shift in how U.S. police service is perceived and evaluated. Unfortunately, changes in public expectations for the police role are underexamined. If officers' perceptions are correct, a realignment of the police function extends beyond organizational changes and includes a realignment of public expectations for police service.

It is beyond the scope of this study to evaluate the appropriateness of the functional breadth of U.S. policing. However, it is undeniable that the police are responsible for an extraordinary range of duties. Moreover, even as the police role has expanded to include more formalized strategic community policing responses since the 1980s (Wilson & Kelling, 1982), post-9/11 counterterrorism initiatives (Crank et al., 2010), and the general acceleration of the professionalization of law enforcement (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; as cited in Mastrofski & Willis, 2010), police budgets as a share of state and local direct expenditures have remained relatively constant over the last four decades (Auxier, 2020). The fiscal pressures on police agencies are already great (Gascón, 2010)—if agencies' resources are cut without a preemptive, strategic realignment of the police function, or if such a functional realignment occurs without first building up the capacity of other agencies and organizations to meet the needs of the public (and increasing public awareness about how to access such resources), the consequences could be dire. In addition to overextending officers, role

strain has also been found to impact interactions with the public, indirectly through increased stress (Euwema et al., 2004; Kop et al., 1999) and directly by increasing cynicism or decreasing motivation (Torres et al., 2018). In an environment where activists, policy makers, and police agencies are making concerted efforts to improve police–community relations and increase police legitimacy, particularly among marginalized communities and communities of color, officers must be given the resources, training, and institutional support to address the breadth of their responsibilities safely, confidently, and in a way that promotes public trust.

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SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Supplemental Material is available in the online version of this article at http://journals.sagepub.com/home/cjb

NOTES

1. Role strain derives from role theory, one model for organizing social behavior (Kahn et al., 1964). Role theory defines a role as a set of norms and expectations associated with a particular social position that organize individuals' behaviors and linked attitudes in social contexts (Banton, 1965, p. 29).

2. I originally aimed for a sample of approximately 35 participants, exceeding sample size recommendations of Creswell (2007) based on the study's design. Unlike quantitative research that focuses on generalizability, the goal of participant selection in qualitative research is to achieve saturation (i.e., informational redundance) by gathering sufficient depth of information to fully understand the range of perceptions and experiences that describe the issue under examination (Fossey et al., 2002; Gaskell, 2000). As such, I allowed for some flexibility related to a subjective sense of whether new information about the theoretical constructs under examination was discussed by participants, which ultimately increased the sample to 48.

3. Recruitment took place from February to June 2019. Study information was disseminated via social media outlets with verified police members, through national officer associations, police department blogs, and police survivor networks. All recruitment materials referred to a website outlining project details and encouraging interested officers to submit an inquiry form. Internal analytic features of the study website show the website was visited by more than 650 unique visitors during that time, 200 of which indicated their interest in the project and received an electronic survey assessing their agency context, professional profile, and personal background. The final sample was drawn from 129 completed surveys that met eligibility criteria. Selected officers were first contacted via their preferred method and then using any other method they indicated. All selected officers were contacted a minimum of 3 times. If they did not respond, the next officer presenting with a similar profile based on the questionnaire was contacted.

4. In consultation with law enforcement leaders, agency size was identified as a key indicator of institutional resources and a determinant of officers' routine role demands. For example, larger departments typically have designated specialized units. However, in all but the most highly resourced departments, officers may serve in specialized units while also performing regular patrols, juggling multiple competing functions. Participants were stratified to approximately match the percentages of officers who work in various settings based on national statistics (Reaves, 2015). In addition, within the constraints of department size, due to the increasing diversity of the U.S. police force (Hyland & Davis, 2019), I prioritized demographic diversity among the sample to understand the experiences of groups typically underrepresented in law enforcement.

5. Contextualizing details for each participant are provided in Supplemental Table S3 (available in the online version of this article).

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