

I'VE LEARNT FROM MY EXPERIENCE AND BY MY SENIOR OFFICERS TO FACE ANY CHALLENGE WITH A BRAVE HEART: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF INDIAN POLICE COMMUNITY MEMBERS DURING THE PANDEMIC

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This qualitative study attempted to assess Indian police officers' lived experiences of the pandemic and lockdown in the country. Sixteen participants (6 female and 10 male police officials) were interviewed. Data from the interviews was analyzed using thematic analysis. It was reported that several changes had occurred in the nature of the responsibilities that police personnel were expected to execute since the outbreak. Prior to it, the primary focus of the participants had been on management of crime. However, after the lockdown, the focus shifted to COVID-19 related duties. Three major sources of concern among police personnel were threat of acquiring the virus, of passing it on to family members and the attacks on policemen as they discharged their duties. Another important challenge was the adverse effects of increased job timings. Lack of proper sleep schedules due to emergency night shifts, increased job demands and mental burden led to feelings of exhaustion and fatigue. Within this scenario, family support and faith in God were reported to play a significant role in coping. Interestingly some police personnel also saw their work as adding a sense of purpose to their lives as they were engaged in protecting other people from the pandemic.

Keywords: Police, COVID-19, Lived experiences, Indian, Qualitative

1. Introduction

Calamities such as natural disasters and epidemics tend to cause large scale destruction among the populace of affected regions. Vulnerable groups face significant risks in such times including people entrenched in poverty, those living in densely populated neighborhoods and people with disabilities. Police departments and medical personnel are two professional communities that play a crucial role in dealing with the havoc wreaked during such times. Essential workers continue to work and respond to calls for assistance even in the most adverse circumstances. The outbreak of the COVID -19 pandemic has been no different. Seen through the lens of the Ecological Levels of Analysis Framework, the pandemic has been pervasive in its impacts. It has severely affected individuals, their Microsystems (such as families, friendship networks, classrooms), organizations (such as schools, workplaces, hospitals) and neighborhoods. It has demanded extreme steps at the Macrolevel such as the banning of mass gatherings even for festivals and the complete shift to work-from-home policies. As the pandemic

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has spread around the globe, police communities across nations have been repeatedly mobilized for critical tasks aimed at controlling the situation.

In India, one of the countries hardest hit by the pandemic, and also one of the most populous in the world, police officers have been assigned high risk tasks to curtail the spread of infection. Police duties have included implementing a nation-wide lockdown announced by the Government of India, managing the labour crisis during the early stages of the lockdown, distributing essential goods such as food rations, guarding containment zones and home quarantines, carrying out high risk evacuations and creating awareness among the public (Nigam, 2020). This kind of work has been beset by challenges for the community of police personnel including threats to their own health and well-being.

Given the imminent risk of contagion, several steps were initiated during the early months of the pandemic to protect the Indian police force from the virus including the installation of sanitizer tunnels, the development of sanitization cells and repeated sanitization of police buildings, barracks and pickets (Bose, 2020). State and central governments also offered monetary compensation for police personnel who tested positive for the virus while discharging their duties or who lost their lives in the line of duty while combating the pandemic (Singh, 2020). Despite these steps by June 2020 more than 800 police personnel in Delhi alone had tested positive for the virus (Press Trust of India, 2020). In fact the police force emerged as a high-risk community for the illness. Moreover, there were several cases of family members of police personnel acquiring the virus (Press Trust of India, 2020). Due to this reason many police force members chose to live away from their families instead of going home after their duty hours (Press Trust of India, 2020; Mirror Online, 2020). In the light of such developments, the Indian Medical Association began a coronavirus helpline for Delhi police personnel and their family members for seeking medical advice from doctors about preventing the virus and handling COVID 19 cases (Press Trust of India, 2020).

Amid the stress created by the pandemic, there were reports of violence by the police against the public including migrant labour who were seeking to go back to their villages during the national lockdown. There were also incidents during which the police faced violence from the public. In one such brutal case, a group of people cut the hand of a police person who attempted to stop their car for checking (Pandey, 2020; BBC news, 2020). In order to avoid committing the context minimization error (Shinn &Toohey, 2003), these instances of violence must be understood with respect to the larger social milieu and structural forces prevailing in the nation at that time. Firstly the police in India do not enjoy a scrupulous reputation. Although there are several honest officers in the police force, allegations of corruption among the police have also been common. Between 2016 and 2019, the Delhi police alone had suspended 1,422 personnel and terminated services of 122 others partly due to complaints related to corrupt conduct (Press trust of India, 2019). Therefore the public may not always react positively to the police. In fact the reactions may be rather adverse. Secondly the onset of the lockdown created immense stress for both the police and the common man. It took away the basic liberties of people and propelled the police into the position of implementing a set of rules most citizens in the country had never lived according to earlier. Such a task is bound to be met by resistance and difficulty.

Another aspect of the context that must be acknowledged alongside recognizing the difficulties involved in executing such responsibilities, is that the police force of the country is

extremely understaffed. Data released by the Bureau of Police Research and Development in 2019 found that crime had increased in India by 28% between 2005 and 2015. While the sanctioned police strength was supposed to be 180 police per lakh persons, the actual strength has been about 135 policemen. This is clearly below standards recommended by the UN of 222 police per lakh persons. Being understaffed amounts to long working hours for the police force (PRS Legislative Research, 2017). According to the Status of Policing in India Report 2019, about 24% police personnel in India work for more than 16 hours a day, and 44% work more than 12 hours (Mehta, 2019). Notwithstanding initial reports of violence, there have been some positive developments. Surveys have indicated that the public's trust toward the police increased during the pandemic. The survey revealed that among the various institutions that were tracked, the highest positive jump in image was registered by the Indian police. In 2018, only about 29.9% respondents had expressed a "lot of trust" in the police. This figure increased to 70 % in 2020 (Deshmukh & Guru, 2020). Media stories of police personnel helping pregnant women in need, senior citizens and those in need for food may have helped in the creation of trust (Mohammed, 2020).

Community Psychology's Ecological Model of stress and coping (Kloos et al., 2020), distinguishes between risk factors and protective factors. These factors can exist at multiple levels of analysis—from individual qualities to macrosystem forces. Risk factors are characteristics of individuals and situations that are thought to increase the likelihood that a person will experience problematic outcomes, such as personal distress, mental disorders, or behavior problems. Policing is undoubtedly an extremely arduous occupation with several risk factors including long shifts, exposure to violence, and disruptions to family life for instance by working on most public holidays. Unsurprisingly police officers suffer from mental health problems such as depression, suicide ideation, alcohol abuse and PTSD, at a rate greater than the general public (Fox et al., 2012). Within this scenario it may be hypothesized that the pandemic has been an additional and significant stressor for police officers, aggravating the existing stresses associated with the occupation. The impacts of this new stressor must be accurately documented. Given Community Psychology's focus on examining potential strengths of individuals and situations that can buffer people from stressors rather than focusing only on potential risks, the research team felt that it was equally important to document the protective factors that helped police officers cope with the risks they faced.

1.2. This study

Slocum (2010) has discussed the negative impact of past and existing stressors on a person's ability to deal with new challenges. Officers dealing with stressors associated with COVID-19 are likely to experience diminished capacity to deal with the numerous other stresses of their profession. Job stress in turn is inversely linked to job commitment (Moon & Johnson, 2012). Further, job stressors directly impact performance indicators (Shane, 2010) and the possibility of police misconduct (Bishopp et al., 2016). In a study done on 3517 police officers in China during the pandemic 12.17% officers had moderate to severe depression and 8.79% of the officers had moderate to severe anxiety due to the added pressure and workload during these tumultuous times (Yuan et al., 2020). Limited research conducted in India has begun to shed light on the

mental health impacts on the police force here (Kokane & Maurya, 2020) however much remains to be understood. This study tries to bridge the gap in literature by detailing the lived experiences of Indian police officers in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is hoped that the information that could lead to the formation of better interventions and institutions that could promote well-being and advance the training of the policing community in India in the face of stressful situations.

2. Method

This research is situated within the framework of qualitative inquiry. Our aim was to describe and interpret the world of police officials by understanding the meaning they attached to their experiences during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the nation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The objective of this research was to acquire knowledge about the social reality of the participants who were at the front lines in the battle against the virus, investigating how they experienced and interpreted their own environment and feelings in the context of the unprecedented circumstances.

2.1 Participants

The study was conducted with 16 participants comprising six female police officials and ten male police officials using the technique of convenience sampling. The participants interviewed were between the ages of 25-51 years (mean age 32.25 years). At the time of the study the participants were residing in the cities of Chandigarh, Mohali, Ropar, and Faridkot. These cities belong to the North Indian state of Punjab. Currently the economy of Punjab is the 15th largest state economy in India. Since the country's independence Punjab has been a predominantly agrarian society. The state has well developed tourism, music and film industries. It is also well-known for its rich culture and traditions. The 1980s were a tumultuous decade for Punjab marked by terrorism and military action. Since then it has remained relatively peaceful. The pandemic was confirmed to have spread to Punjab on 9 March 2020, when an Indian man returning from Italy was found to be positive. The ensuing National lockdown severely affected the economy of the State. By 31st March 2021, the Government of India had reported Punjab to have had over 200,000 cases of the COVID-19 virus.

The participants recruited for the present study held different ranks, with the majority being sub inspectors (n=10), followed by head constables (n=3), a senior constable (n=1), constable (n=1) and inspector (n=1). The educational attainment levels of participants varied from high school (n=2) to graduation (n=11), and post-graduation (n=3). All the participants were involved in the maintenance of law and order during the COVID-19 pandemic and duties such as barricading roads and patrolling. Other professional tasks engaged in by the participants included working on the front lines to ensure the isolation of COVID-19 patients, data management in the health department and distribution of food items to persons in need.

2.2 Tools

To better understand the effect of the pandemic on Indian police officials, a semi-structured interview schedule was drafted. The questions were based on an array of domains pertaining to the participants' lived experiences in the last few months. The interview schedule was designed to investigate the participants' perceptions regarding changes in their routine and workload, effects on their mental and physical health, implications of their professional duties for their families and the personal and professional challenges that had arisen since the spread of COVID-19 in the country. Emphasis was also placed on understanding police officials' coping strategies, their views on the support their community received for their work from the public, their families, and their department, the attitude of the public during the course of the pandemic, adequacy of their professional training, measures for safety adopted and the sources of support they desired. The questions developed for the interview were open ended in nature so as to obtain detailed answers from the participants. Due to the lockdown restrictions and the busy schedule of the police officials, the interviews were conducted telephonically. Each interview lasted for 50-60 minutes.

2.3 Data Analysis

Data received from the interviews were analyzed using the technique of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis allows the researchers to answer the research questions of the study in a significant way by categorizing universally recognized patterns and themes amongst the obtained data. This technique has been widely used to explore abundant qualitative data from focus groups, interviews, and qualitative surveys. Clark and Braun (2013) outlined certain steps for thematic analysis which were used in the current study to extract the themes from the data. The 7 steps implemented were transcription, reading and familiarization, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finalizing the analysis.

3. Results

Assessment of the pandemic

While assessing the pandemic, the participants recognized how diverse and multi-faceted its effects had been. Although the participants themselves did not face any threat of unemployment or loss of livelihood, they expressed concern for the devastating economic impact the pandemic was having on other communities. The police officers had witnessed how COVID-19 patients were refused help by some others in the neighbourhood and were treated like 'untouchables.' In these situations, the police extended support to the patients. The participants also recognized the challenges involved in imposing lockdowns and quarantine in a large, populated country like India. This was seen as especially true for slums which tend to be congested and have systems of shared public toilets.

Several participants also expressed that while the situation was extremely serious, many members of the public exhibited a nonchalant attitude in the face of clear governmental guidelines to stop the spread of the virus. The participants reported that people left their homes for unnecessary reasons, although the public health message being disseminated was to curtail such outings and travel. Many even avoided wearing masks despite it being mandatory to do so. The casual attitude in the face of a real threat was attributed to a perceived sense of invincibility among the public and an unwillingness to give up on the pleasures of life. The reportedly low mortality rate due to COVID-19 in India (compared to the high number of cases), pandemic fatigue and lack of education in the country were seen as other factors contributing to people's lack of caution. Sub-inspector, 26 year old Amandeep Kaur, who was in charge of law and order maintenance said:

People were told that to buy essentials only one person should move out of the house. But people would not understand. Four people used to go from one home. Many people would move out in the name of buying essentials. They were not able to understand the situation and its depth. People used to say that they are taking care, but they were not.

Sub-inspector, Jaydeep Jakhar, aged 25 years whose main work had focused on maintaining law and order and isolating COVID-19 patients stated:

The government can keep issuing guidelines but if the public doesn't take precautions and become aware then we can't avoid the rise in cases. They do not want to compromise their lifestyle and are only thinking about enjoyment and not survival. Public should only leave (home) when it is an emergency.

The participants felt that while there was a fear of the virus initially, it had now died down. The serious implications of acquiring COVID-19 had largely been forgotten. It was also felt that some people had always considered the virus to be a myth. Such perceptions had led people to have a light-hearted attitude towards matters related to the pandemic as well as to the police's efforts to keep them safe. Constable Pritpal Singh, aged 27 years whose responsibilities including placing and maintaining police barricades during the lockdown, expressed:

I feel they were taking it as a joke. When police tried explaining them, they laughed with each other behind our backs. They only complied when police resorted to harsher punishments.

Some participants felt that the government's erratic use of lockdowns had contributed to the public's lack of seriousness on the matter. 35 year old Head Constable Rajneesh Singh who had conducted several kinds of duties since the start of the pandemic such as documentation work related to FIRs, distribution of food to poor, patrolling and barricading, shared:

Government was saying that weekend lockdowns will be imposed. But yesterday it was said that Saturday lockdown is lifted. Now there are rumours that Sunday lockdown will be lifted. Some shops are allowed to open some are not, which makes the implementation even more difficult. Problem is if government keeps changing guidelines so fast, it gives space for the spreading of rumours on media.

The participants spoke of how the pandemic had created several new responsibilities for them to fulfill. Head Constable, Balwinder Singh, aged 44 years said:

It has highly impacted police duty. Police has to devote more time in service of people and workload has increased too. Things like social distancing or self-quarantining or getting oneself tested which people are obliged to perform on their own, is also seen over by the police.

People's carelessness was seen to further increase the workload for essential workers by making contact tracing even more challenging than it otherwise was. Some participants spoke of the unsustainable nature of lockdowns, due to their adverse impact on the Indian economy, thereby making public caution the most viable way of remaining safe from the virus.

Training and disaster relief work

Most participants mentioned having no prior experience with any disaster relief work through the span of their careers. Two officers who had been in the force for over two decades compared the pandemic situation to other crisis situations they had faced. Baldev Singh, Head Constable, aged 43 years, who was serving as driver to the Station House Officer at his police station, discussed his experience of being part of an evacuation team during the heavy floods that occurred in Punjab in 1988. However, that situation was perceived to be distinct from the circumstances created during the pandemic:

That time, police had to rescue people, people were standing on rooftops or they were stuck badly in floods so police majorly was involved in rescuing people and providing them with food to eat. Now in corona, we are requesting people to stay indoors, to follow precautions. We can't rescue people out of the illness now as we rescued people out of flood, we can only enforce implementation of precautionary steps of wearing masks, to undergo testing in case of cough or cold, maintain social distancing. In rescue operations we had no fear of touching people or going close to them but now when we have to transport corona positive people to hospitals, we are fearful of being close to them.

Inspector Rajiv Kumar, aged 51 years who was serving as a Station House Officer (SHO), responsible for maintaining law and order in Mohali city, spoke of having dealt with terrorism in Punjab in the 1980s. This experience appeared to influence his perceptions of the challenges created by the pandemic. He expressed those days as laden with immense fear as buses were

hijacked, public transport was bombed and police officers were shot at. Compared to those experiences, the pandemic seemed a safer situation to be in. Yet it posed its own challenges. The officer explained that terrorists had recognizable faces and could be identified. However the virus was invisible and its presence was not easily detectable. These experiences aside, most participants felt that they had never experienced anything like the pandemic before. Senior Constable, Rajbir Singh, aged 35 years, who had been assigned the duties of barricading parts of the city, patrolling and distribution of food among the poor, mentioned the need for training police personnel on matters related to disease and health since they were now engaged in public health issues. When asked about the adequacy of the training they had received for pandemic like situations, early on in their careers, the participants spoke of receiving training mainly in terms of law and order maintenance. There was also an acknowledgement that there tended to be a gap between training and coping with a situation in real-time. Sub-inspector Neha Sood, aged 29 years, involved with data management in the health department, reported:

The training which we receive requires us to be prepared for all kinds of situations. But there is a difference between training and the real situation.

After the outbreak of the pandemic, the participants had been provided guidelines on managing the situation. Others had attended talks and seminars to gain more information. Head Constable Rajneesh Singh, shared:

We weren't given any special training for this situation. We were only issued guidelines and we had online meetings where our officers told us what to do, which precautions to follow and whom to fine.

Most participants placed emphasis on learning on the job and using their prior experiences to cope with the current situation. The police personnel spoken to in this study felt that they had adapted to the pandemic situation fairly quickly. They made these adaptations based on the guidelines issued by the government and reported taking necessary precautions to execute their duties and responsibilities. The government had provided masks, gloves, and sanitizers to use during field work. Some participants also said that they focused on consuming a healthy diet, taking vitamin supplements, and trying to maintain distance from anyone they interacted with in the field.

Professional changes

The participants reported that several changes had occurred in the nature of the responsibilities they were expected to execute as part of their job. The hours spent at work grew to be intense and highly demanding. Several participants reported more than 12 hour days, with little time to eat or sleep. There was reported to be a reduction in specific types of crime such as robbery, murder and rape during the initial part of the lockdown. However, there was a perceived spike in domestic violence cases and family disputes. The economic difficulties created by the lockdown were seen to have resulted in a large number of suicides. Also prior to the pandemic,

the primary focus of the participants had been on the management of crime. However, after the onset of the lockdown, the focus shifted to COVID-19 related duties such as barricading roads and patrolling to ensure that the lockdown rules were being met. In case people were belligerent in their refusal to follow rules, the participants were required to fine or arrest them. Balvinder Pal, aged 44 years who was serving as Reader to a Station House officer in the city of Ropar expressed:

Now we see that people due to the fear of Rs. 500 fine (for not wearing masks) have started wearing masks. As soon as people spot a police vehicle, they get their masks on, otherwise we see that even though they have masks around their necks, but I don't know why, they don't try to cover their nose and mouth with it, I don't know how difficult is that. I personally talk to these people and make them more aware of their personal responsibility. Personal responsibility is largely lacking. Now as we go for patrolling in the markets, we see that people have started gathering. Although gatherings are less than what used to be before lockdown, but then given the pandemic situation, gatherings should be minimal. But no, people are not taking personal responsibility to save their lives. We see people standing in groups, observing no social distancing until the police requests them, fines them or threatens them.

Police personnel were also reported to be involved in contact tracing, moving patients from homes to the hospitals and distributing welfare items and essential ration goods to migrant workers or people who could not afford to buy food due to the loss of their livelihood. Inspector Rajiv Kumar stated:

I had to patrol all public places like markets, theaters, parks, to ensure that people were not moving around. Also had to ensure that no one in my duty area slept on an empty stomach so distributed bananas, rice, sometimes cooked food like curry rice, in the poor localities with the help of NGO's.

Constable Pritpal Singh also expressed:

There were old people who suffered from severe health issues like heart diseases so they also called police to help and transport them to hospitals because there was lack of public transport. Police cooperated with such emergency cases. Although it's the responsibility of health department and ambulance but people called police so we went and helped them due to emergency situation. There's a lack of system and demarcation of duties between health department and police department. So like police was transporting people with corona also to hospitals as well as other emergency cases. Clearly it's a health department responsibility.

Also, in carrying out these duties, the participants had to be cautious about keeping their masks on, ensuring that people they dealt with were wearing masks as well and sanitizing the objects in their near vicinity. The paucity of sleep, lack of space and resources at work and difficulties in practicing social distancing due to their nature of their job, created difficulties for several participants. Inspector Rajiv Kumar reported :

One complainant brings 3-4 more people with them. They just don't listen if we say that come alone. They stand in groups everywhere, especially in markets. It's also a challenge to make people follow the rules, we have to explain so much to them about the disease and how not taking precautions will increase transmission, ensuring people practice social distancing.

There was also the absurdity of having to formally charge COVID-19 patients for refusing hospitalization. Inspector Rajiv Kumar added:

One corona patient had to be taken to hospital in early lockdown but the patient refused to support us. Patient was adamant at not going to the hospital but as per the government's early guidelines, we had to take the patients to hospital for isolation. Despite repeated requests, the patient did not comply with police, which is when we had to issue an FIR under section 270, Disaster Management Act against her.

The pandemic had created a situation wherein police personnel had to get criminals tested for the virus upon arrest. While they were expected to socially distance from people, the police also had to ensure that criminals would not escape their grasp. A source of worry and anger among the participants was the attacks made on police personnel. None of the participants had been victims of such attacks so far but had heard of colleagues being attacked or had seen such incidents in the media. The participants felt that they were being mistreated although they were simply seeking to fulfill their duties in the face of a highly challenging situation. They expressed feeling sad, angry and demotivated due to ill-treatment from certain members of the public. Baldev Singh, 43 year old Head Constable, who served as the driver to the Station House Officer in Mohali city, Punjab expressed:

Like in Patiala city of Punjab, there was a case where some hooligans cut the hand of a police officer on duty. It makes me feel sad. We are serving for people, we are always trying to help people, we expect them to cooperate but when they resist so badly attacking us, it's just heartbreaking.

Personal changes

A major source of stress and anxiety for participants was regarding their own safety from the virus. This concern was reported to stem from the rising number of deaths worldwide and lack of medication to treat the virus. Head Constable Balwinder Singh said:

Cause of stress and worry is the drastic rise in the number of corona cases day by day. It has brought such huge changes in some days, killing lots of people, changing someone's life completely. It's worrisome that we think about something and then such an unprecedented, never thought of situation arises. There's so much of uncertainty, we can't even do anything to solve this pandemic situation only. Precautions are a temporary solution right now.

The fear of transmitting the viral infection to their families emerged as the major personal challenge for the participants. Constable Pritpal Singh expressed:

My sister is married and she has a 2-year-old son. I'm absolutely scared of transmitting the virus to the child. I don't want the baby to suffer because of me. Coming back home, there was a fear that I may take the disease back to my home and kid. Similarly, I always had this in mind that because of me, my friends should not get infected.

To avoid the spread of COVID-19 in their family, they maintained physical distance from family members. Other precautions mentioned were bathing in hot water, sanitizing one's hands, washing one's own clothes and eating separately. Reduced time with their families and hectic job schedules, meant fewer opportunities to seek emotional support. Sub-inspector, Rajbir Sran, said:

I avoid meeting my parents and I don't get very close to them like earlier I used to touch their feet, hug my mom once in a while but now I don't prefer going close to them at all because I know that I am in a risky job, and I realize that I may bring the virus home. But I want by parents to stay protected so I avoid getting close to them. So touching feet now gets replaced by a namaste with folded hands, from a distance. I try to isolate myself from family so even when I go home, I stay in a separate room. Moral support is lacking. A person sits in family, talks with them, shares feelings and gets relaxed but this is hugely lacking in the present scenario. Can't even get in touch with family because I am too busy in duty.

Inspector Rajiv Kumar also reported:

I didn't talk to my sister for weeks because I was so busy in work. Till the time you talk to your dear ones, stress only builds up. Not being able to stay in touch with sister and friends only added to my stress. That emotional support is lacking.

There was a decline in the time spent with friends and outings with friends had stopped. The time with friends had earlier acted as a stress buster and a source of entertainment. The participants felt that the reduction in this relaxation time increased their mental burden. Sub-inspector, Rajbir Sran shared:

I have some really good friends beyond police department. They are very supportive and before corona, we would meet. Even if I was engrossed in duty, they would come to police station and meet me and used to hang around in the nearby market, would chat and joke around. Oh God it used to be an amazing feeling, freedom is what would define those meetings, no fear of corona, no masks, closeness in bonding but now it feels as if my freedom to bond with friends, to interact and meet them is taken away. So I can't meet them because they are also afraid of meeting me. They have small kids at home so you know there's always fear with children, have to be extra cautious. Again, I can't talk to them nicely on phone also, because I'm just way too busy with my duty.

Another important personal challenge was the adverse effects of increased job timings on health. Lack of proper sleep schedules due to emergency night shifts, increased job demands and mental burden led to exhaustion, headache, swollen ankles, weakness, fatigue and loss of energy. Interestingly some police personnel while acknowledging the stresses of the situation also saw their work as adding a sense of purpose to their lives as they were engaged in protecting other people from the pandemic. These participants felt that the pandemic was an opportunity in disguise to serve the nation and its people. There was also a sense of pride in the work one did as a police officer. Many officers spoke of an increased enthusiasm to fulfill their duties during the lockdown. This was seen as a time of taking action for the benefit of the public. Sub-inspector, Rajni Gilawat, aged 25 years, who held responsibilities related to law and order maintenance and food distribution, felt:

First of all whenever one is in the uniform, energy comes on its own. If there is work we will do it.. We are proud to do this work. This is our duty to help people.

Sub-Inspector Jaydeep Jakhar, believed:

It was not much of a challenge, it was an experience. We learned many things and are prepared to tackle something like this in the future.

Sources of support

The participants reported that higher ranked officers such as the Superintendent of Police and the Station House Officers were their strongest pillars of support who kept motivating the workforce by appreciating their efforts. The officers worked with dedication, and took personal responsibility at the forefront which in turn acted as a source of strength for the participants. The support and cooperation by colleagues of the same rank was also a source of motivation. Senior Constable, Rajbir Singh shared:

Officers who kept motivating by complimenting and giving verbal praises about our hard work became a source of strength. I felt that okay if I'm doing duty diligently, it's also getting recognized by officers.

It was reported that police departments had distributed various awards, medals and certificates which the participants identified as contributing to their sense of motivation. Departments also offered support by distributing protective equipment. Constable Priptal Singh reported:

Department has awarded people who worked diligently during this situation. Some officials have been promoted due to their hard work during lockdown, also DGP discs have been awarded and certificates too. I have been awarded with a certificate from DGP for good services during Corona times.

Participants felt that their families provided immense support by engaging in a positive dialogue regarding the need to perform duties with dedication. They supported the participants by putting no additional family responsibility and allowing them to focus all their energies on professional services. Sub-inspector, Meenu Hooda who had been posted in a Civil hospital for data management of corona cases expressed:

My family is my biggest support. Now I have to go for night duties, which increased during corona period. Such night duties are difficult for lady officers but when family supports, like if someone from family can drop you to the job at night, that's also a huge help. Moreover my father always says that if you do your duty properly, you need not fear any result. It really motivates me.

Senior Constable, Rajbir Singh said:

Biggest support was family. Whenever I used to tell my wife that I won't be able to come home in time, she would say no problem, take care of yourself. It's hard to manage the child alone. My wife was my biggest support as she managed our child alone for months.

Members of the general public were also seen as appreciative of the police's efforts during the pandemic. Constable Priptal Singh offered:

Public also appreciated us, did clapping for us, distributed gifts to us like small trophies, things like sanitizers etc, that motivated us to work even harder.

A major coping mechanism was the belief in the philosophy of "karma". The police personnel believed that if they performed their duties with devotion, their hard work would pay off with good results like protection from the viral infection. Faith in God or a supportive and protective

universal power also helped in coping with the stressful situation. Head Constable Balwinder Singh expressed:

It's my duty and karma and that motivates us. My job is my responsibility which has to be carried out responsibly. Worship and offering my prayers to God give me the faith that God will protect me because I am doing my duty with full devotion. God will help because I help others sincerely by doing my duty well.

Sub-inspector Rajbir Sran said:

I believe that if we do our karma nicely, God will always protect us. This philosophy helped me because I have been doing my karma, my duty nicely, so I know that God will protect me and my family against any consequences.

In terms of the support they still sought, the participants once again spoke of the need for the public to be more cautious in following guidelines related to the pandemic, thereby making things easier for the police. Woman Sub Inspector, Neha Sood felt:

In today's situation, we hope for public support. We will be able to implement (COVID-19) guidelines if we get the support of the public.

The support of politicians in avoiding mass agitations and gatherings was also sought. Constable Priptal Singh stated:

Without politicians support also we can't be successful. Politicians should avoid conducting agitations and mass gatherings; instead, they should satisfy the public by telling them the need to follow precautions.

4. Discussion

The results indicated that the participants had experienced a large number of changes within their professional and personal lives since the outbreak of the pandemic. They had been assigned a host of new and difficult responsibilities related to implementing the lockdown. It is clear for all to see that the changes were thrust upon the police community and the nation by and large, due to the nature of the virus which presented itself as a rapidly spreading threat. Moreover, the ensuing duration of these new responsibilities was largely unknown. Given this situation, the participants harbored a number of concerns. One of these was about their own vulnerability to acquiring the virus and then passing it on to their families. Similar concerns have been reported by health care professionals who also represent a vulnerable group when it comes to the virus (Nguyen et al., 2020). Although the participants interviewed in the present study engaged in several precautions to safeguard their own physical well-being and that of their families, none of the precautionary measures taken, are guaranteed ways of preventing the virus. In turn it has

been reported that families too worry about those members who are serving police officers (Mitra, 2020). Findings such as these necessitate acknowledging the family-based impacts of the pandemic. While police officials are the only ones among their family in the field, their experiences on duty directly and indirectly impact their entire families, more so now than ever. The problems created by the pandemic thus do not remain individual in nature but come to impact their entire microsystem of the police official (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Addressing the concerns of police personnel as they carry on with the pandemic related duties calls for a systems-based approach through which the impacts on police officials as well as their families are understood and duly addressed. This would have to include understanding vulnerabilities to maladaptive behavior, illness, personal and family problems and a focus on the promotion of social-emotional competence, family strengths, along with intervention-based work in non-clinical settings that are accessible to police personnel and their families.

Even for the most experienced police officers, the pandemic presented a novel situation. They compared it to the previous crisis based work they had done, including rescue operations during floods and fighting terrorism. In each case the solutions had been clear. People could be evacuated during floods while terrorists could be identified and arrested. The COVID-19 situation was completely different, at least in one sense. There seemed to be no way to rescue people from what was especially an invisible and ubiquitous enemy. Further, it was clear that the pandemic had produced two role conflicts for the participants.

Firstly, while participants were expected to socially distance from people, the requirements of their work simply did not allow them to do so. For instance, their job entailed high levels of interaction with the people and also required them to remain physically close to any person they were seeking to keep in custody. Secondly, the participants had the desire to seek time with their family and friends and yet had to maintain a distance with them or did not get the time to be with them. This is an important finding given that threatening situations tend to increase one's sense of affiliation (Schachter, 1951). The inability to experience affiliating ties could then hamper both individual and family well-being. While police personnel were not being able to access sources of support outside of their workplace, they did report finding adequate support within the police community from senior officials and colleagues. Senior officials were reported to be a tremendous source of encouragement. Supervisor support has been found to play an important role in police officers' job satisfaction (Lameck, 2011; Kula & Guler, 2014). In the same vein, peer-support can provide health professionals positive validation, a sense of shared experience, coping strategies, opportunities for reflective practice, and enhanced self-confidence (Forster & Hafiz, 2015).

In the present context, it may be important to create more avenues for the expression of peer support and peer-based interventions for the police forces of the country. The focus of these steps should ideally be to strengthen the sense of community among the members of the force, to create greater feelings of belongingness, interdependence, and mutual commitment that can envelop individuals with a sense of unity. A strong and positive sense of community has been associated with various psycho-social benefits at the individual, organizational, and community levels. Stronger expressions of support and mentorship programs can allow for the better integration and fulfillment of needs and fostering a shared emotional connection. In these ways, peer-based interventions may be particularly useful for strengthening the social capital of the

police community, which is defined as those features of social life that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives (Putnam, 1996). Putnam (2000) also stated that social capital varies by communities and when communities have a great deal of social capital, their members benefit.

A major grievance expressed by police officials was regarding the behavior of the public during the pandemic wherein it was felt that the people of the country were not being as cautious as they ought to. Apart from the potential causes mentioned by the participants, including people's feelings of invincibility and pleasure-seeking tendencies, a host of situational and personal factors may explain why people do not practice COVID-19 related precautions. In terms of social distancing, the population density of the country poses a challenge with above 455 people living within a square kilometer of area in India (Jha & Kawoosa, 2020). Pandemic fatigue stemming from months of lockdown and isolation within homes could also be another reason explaining the lack of caution. The WHO has recognized that while there may be general support for pandemic response strategies, countries are reporting increasing levels of pandemic fatigue among their citizens (Bavadam, 2020). Although the Government of India made masks mandatory during the early days of the outbreak, surveys conducted 6 months later found that many Indians were not wearing masks in public. A survey conducted across 18 Indian cities indicated that while 90% Indians were aware about the requirement of wearing masks, only 44% persons were indeed wearing them, as required. Breathing problems emerged to be a key reason, followed by discomfort and inconvenience. There was also an assumption that as long as social distancing was being followed, there was no need for a mask (Alves, 2020). Similowski et al (2020) have stated that while face masks contribute to the protection against contamination of the people wearing them and those in close proximity, they are associated with a series of material constraints: thinking about it, carrying it, wearing it and then washing it. Further they are also associated with inconveniences in our social interactions by obstructing verbal communication for example due to a muffled voice and making facial expressions difficult to decipher.

Finally, they can be uncomfortable to wear, being slightly resistive to airflow and a possible source of carbon dioxide rebreathing. Each of these may act as barriers preventing people from wearing masks, despite knowing the benefits involved (Similowski et al., 2020). According to the Health Belief model (Hochbaum & Rosenstock, 1952) barriers can play a strong role in health behaviors than benefits. This is particularly likely in the case of those who feel a low sense of susceptibility and vulnerability to the virus. Within this group come young people, who according to the survey cited above, are the least likely to wear masks. Given this scenario, the government and police efforts need to reiterate not only the need to wear masks but also the probability of acquiring the virus and its potential effects on persons of different age groups, including the young.

The police officials reported that their efforts to implement safety guidelines were met with resistance from members of the public. This finding resonates with reports from police personnel in other parts of the world. For example, Rooney & McNicholas (2020) explored the potential burdens experienced by the Gardia Síochána as they were called upon by the Irish government to impose a unique mode of harm reduction and 'police' in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar to the findings of the present study, this study also showed how the force had to embrace a series of changes to their professional duties over a very short time frame ranging from new

roster arrangements and postponing retirements to establishing a specialist COVID-19 unit. A steady worsening of the problem demanded a significant increase in public surveillance to keep people safe. However, media reports suggested that Gardaí met with varying levels of resistance and threat when enforcing government restrictions on movement with officers being spat and coughed at by members of the public. This may partly be understood as a reaction by the public to the loss of basic autonomy including the freedom to leave one's home or travel by public transport.

An important point to consider is that the management of the pandemic requires tremendous support and cooperation from the public. Yet the main training police officers receive is in terms of maintaining public order. The pandemic has brought forth the need to train police officers in softer skills that shall enhance their ability to win the trust and cooperation of people. Some of these skills include active listening, communication and rapport development. An approach grounded in community policing may be a helpful path to adopt not only during the pandemic but also after it, as a way of addressing the low levels of trust that have existed between people and the police force in this country, alongside the public perception that Indian police officials tend to be corrupt. This reflects Community Psychology's emphasis on increasing citizen participation, that is, the ability of citizens to participate in decisions by larger bodies that can shape a country's future. Citizen participation is often seen as an essential quality of a democracy. It involves citizens making their voices heard and acting in the public sphere.

Community policing initiatives have been taken earlier such as in the South Indian city of Bangalore in 2016 (Seo, 2016). A program was developed around the concept of a 'beat constable' who kept in regular touch with people in the respective beat in a police station jurisdiction assigned to them. They were assisted in this task by area *suraksha mitras* (volunteers from the local community). The volunteers also keep in touch with members of the police station jurisdiction, organising safety awareness meetings and other informal meetings on safety and security. Their efforts were supported by policing committees (*jana suraksha samithis*), who met monthly to discuss local safety issues. Surveys conducted 18 months after the program showed that the general perception among police officers stationed in community policing areas was that crime had decreased in their own neighbourhoods. Similarly, citizens living in community policing areas felt that crime in their own neighbourhoods had remained steady or had gone down, although it had risen in the city, at large. Similar programs during these times may prove to be critical in generating greater public support for the adherence of COVID-19 guidelines among the general public. Such programs could be more efficacious if grounded within the idea of collective wellness rather than one community monitoring the well-being of the other.

Given that the situation is likely to be characterized by uncertainty for several months to come, the provision of safety equipment that protects the body from the virus is certainly necessary but not sufficient. The pandemic also has extensive implications for mental health. In order to build psychological immunity among police officers, departments need to focus on improving adaptive coping skills that can help in preventing burnout, poor mental health, and maladaptive behaviors such as substance abuse. The focus has to remain on enhancing resilience prior to and after critical incidents. Culturally sensitive counseling modules and peer support may prove to be important aspects of resiliency development programs. Access to counseling services while addressing the stigma associated with seeking mental health support also appears imperative.

Concerns regarding confidentiality and the potential “negative career impact” have been shown to be barriers to police officers seeking professional support (Fox et al., 2012). However, officers with mental-health conditions have high productivity loss at an annual cost of \$4,489 per officer. Hence it is clear that psychological and economics costs are high if action is not taken in regard to the provision of mental health services to police officials.

It is also important to further encourage certain kinds of coping mechanisms already been used by police officers who participated in the study. For example, some officers saw their work during the pandemic as a good opportunity of serving their nation. For others, their work during the pandemic increased their sense of purpose in life. Several officers spoke of feeling especially proud of providing food to poor people during the lockdown. This was a time when daily wage earners had absolutely no source of income due to the closure of all but essential services. Police officers distributed food packets to them provided by the government or donated by celebrities. One officer also spoke of purchasing food with his own money for the poor when no food packets were available. Such perceptions of purposefulness and pride have been proven to be useful for coping by health care workers during epidemics. Wu et al. (2009) found that a sense of altruism concerning one’s work could be protective and help allay fears of contracting an infectious disease like SARS oneself or transmitting it to loved ones. Their findings indicated a buffering effect of altruistic acceptance of risk on the development of PTSD (Wu et al., 2009). The police officers also relied on the notion of karma, an idea that stems from Buddhist and Hindu philosophy. Karma represents the ethical dimension of the process of rebirth (samsara), belief in which is generally shared among various religious communities of India. The law of Karma states that one reaps as one sows and has been found to help people in making sense of their suffering and re-adapt to changed realities (Anand, 2009). Participants in this study believed that they were doing good work and these good actions would return to them in some other form.

5.Limitations and future directions

Despite best efforts, the present study is not without its limitations. Firstly, the interviews were conducted telephonically and not face to face, due to the constraints presented by the pandemic. Thus, the absence of visual cues could have resulted in the compromising of nonverbal as well as contextual data. Secondly, the sample comprised of police officials from the state of Punjab, which is a small part of North India. This places restraints on the generalizability of findings. Moreover, the sample did not include police officials of all ranks. For instance, officials with a designation higher than the post of Inspector were not studied. Further since a qualitative methodology was adopted, researcher's bias may have influenced the findings. Lastly, there could be more to experiences of participants than were captured through the interviews. Like all self-report data, the information collected in the present study could have been influenced by the social desirability bias. Future researches may be conducted with participants from more diverse geographical areas, given the tremendous heterogeneity of the Indian sub-continent. Police officials deployed in containment zones may have different experiences than those in non-containment zones. Similarly, those deputed in rural areas may have experiences different from those in urban areas. Collecting and comparing the experiences of officials working in different

contexts shall provide a richer picture of the implications of the pandemic for police work. Studies that are longitudinal in nature will be able to capture the long-term impact of the pandemic. Such studies should address police officials and their family members, given that the pandemic's effects cut through all levels of an individual's ecosystem.

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