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New Cops on The Block:

Generation Z's Impact on Law Enforcement's Retention Crisis

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by

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## **Abstract**

### **New Cops on The Block: Generation Z and the Culture of Law Enforcement**

By: Sofia Allegra Cavaness

Law enforcement agencies face a recruitment and retention crisis with significant implications for public safety and organizational effectiveness. Traditional police culture has contributed to strained police-community relations, negative public perception, and poor officer retention. In response, agencies are attempting cultural transformation through reformed socialization practices aimed at improving public interactions, officer well-being, and retention outcomes. This crisis has coincided with broader cultural transformation within agencies, yet little research examines how Generation Z officers (Born 1996-2012), the newest cohort entering law enforcement, experience organizational socialization amid these shifts.

This study examines this cultural evolution through a generational framework, investigating the Generation Z officers and their organizational socialization (OS). While High-Reliability Organizations like policing traditionally require newcomers to shed previous identities and adopt the profession's identity through assimilation, each generation brings characteristics shaped by unique formative experiences. This research explores whether and how Generation Z's generational attributes influence their socialization experiences and ultimately, their retention in law enforcement careers. This qualitative study draws on 37 semi-structured interviews with officers across three generational cohorts (Generation Z, Millennials, and Generation X) within a West Coast law enforcement department. Findings reveal that officers across all generations explicitly distinguish between

what they term "Old Culture", and an emerging "New Culture". Generation Z officers are entering law enforcement within this cultural context, navigating competing expectations from senior officers who may hold divergent views on appropriate practice. Intergenerational dynamics reveal friction around mentorship, identity frameworks, and psychological contracts that influence the socialization of the newest generational cohort into the workplace, as well as how it affects retention.

## **New Cops on The Block: Generation Z and the Culture of Law Enforcement**

After the death of George Floyd in 2020, the resignation rate of law enforcement officers increased by 279% (Mourtgoes et al., 2022). Prior to 2022, law enforcement had already experienced over a decade of declining applicants (PERF, 2023), but the significant turnover of officers has sparked concerns, particularly because research links a lower per capita officer presence to increased crime rates (Kovandzic & Sloan, 2002; Levitt, 1997; Marvell & Moody, 1996; Mello, 2019). Orrick (2018) emphasizes the relationship between the quality of service provided by a law enforcement department and the caliber of its employees. Given this, officer retention is a critical challenge for law enforcement agencies due to the high costs and significant time required to train new personnel (Hilal & Litsey, 2020; Orrick, 2008, 2018). The new personnel that are currently entering the workplace is Generation Z, a generation known for having their own perspective on careers and work expectations (Myers & Cavaness, 2024).

Recent survey data from the International Association Chief of Police (IACP) showed a significant recruitment and retention challenge in the U.S. within law enforcement agencies, with 78% of agencies reporting difficulties in attracting qualified candidates, and 65% experiencing a shortage of applicants for law enforcement positions (BJA 2023; IACP, 2019). Furthermore, 75% of agencies acknowledge that recruitment has become increasingly difficult over the past five years, prompting 50% to alter their policies to improve recruitment odds, while 25% have been forced to cut back on services, units, or positions due to these staffing challenges (BJA 2023; IACP, 2019). Additionally, they found that the main factors driving the recruitment and retention crisis came from, generational differences, public

image, hiring process difficulties and challenges to civilian recruitment (BJA 2023; IACP, 2019).

The negative perception of law enforcement culture represents a significant barrier to recruitment and retention. Following high-profile incidents, public trust in law enforcement has deteriorated, impacting agencies' ability to attract qualified candidates (Copeland et al., 2022; Lentz, 2022; Segovia, 2024). This "legitimacy crisis" manifests through decreased public confidence in policing (Steele et al., 2023), amplified by social media's role in broadcasting police misconduct (Lentz, 2022). Research demonstrates that negative publicity not only deters potential recruits but also undermines current officers' self-legitimacy and motivation (Deuchar et al., 2019; Nix & Wolfe, 2017). The "Ferguson effect" specifically documents how perceptions of police illegitimacy deter college students from considering law enforcement careers (Morrow et al., 2019). For Generation Z, who grew up witnessing highly publicized instances of police violence, concerns about organizational legitimacy and community relations significantly influence career decisions (Abbott, 2024). Lentz (2022) found that 13 of 15 surveyed officers stated they would leave the profession if there were no personal consequences, with negative social perceptions cited as a primary factor for wanting to leave. This suggests that external perceptions of law enforcement culture create both recruitment challenges, by deterring qualified candidates from entering, and retention vulnerabilities, by eroding current officers' commitment to remaining in the profession.

This retention and recruitment challenge calls for these agencies to embrace and better understand generational values to effectively attract and retain high-quality officers. As research confirms, individuals from various generations have their own expectations concerning their treatment, benefits and opportunities, and their preferred management styles

(Glazer et al., 2018). The characteristics that define each generation are shaped by the societal events they experience during their formative years such as upticks or downturns in the economy, the values and norms of their parents, advances in technology, politics, national and international conflicts, etc. (Swanzen, 2018). These influences shape how individuals view the world, the values they hold, and their expectations for life and career. Most investigations of generational differences emphasize that no generation is inherently better or worse than another, but rather each is unique, with distinct strengths and weaknesses (Pilcher, 1994). Employing organizations can benefit from effectively recognizing generational differences and crafting strategies that effectively engage individuals at their specific stage of development (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010).

The importance of generational cohorts has attracted some skeptics. In part, critics point to the fact that many studies that aim to identify generational effects do not rely on empirical evidence which can negatively impact both research and its applications (Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010; Becton et al., 2014). Those scholars often contend that these differences might better be explained by the stages of life individuals are in rather than by their generational groupings (Carlson & Gjerde, 2009; Parry & Urwin, 2011). For example, Wagner (2007) suggests that individuals in their 20s, regardless of their generation, commonly focus on establishing their independence, advancing their careers, and starting families.

However, this life-stage explanation cannot account for documented shifts in the *timing* of major life events across generational cohorts. If life-stage alone explained behavior, we would expect individuals at age 25 to demonstrate similar patterns regardless of when they were born. Yet empirical evidence reveals substantial generational differences: while

Baby Boomers married at a median age of 21-23, Millennials delay marriage until their late 20s or early 30s (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025). Similarly, rates of independent household formation, career establishment, and parenthood have all shifted later for younger generations compared to what previous cohorts experienced at the same chronological age (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). This shift cannot be explained by life-stage alone, as it reflects changing economic conditions (e.g., student debt, housing costs), technological disruptions (e.g., dating apps, remote work), and evolving cultural values (e.g., individualization, delayed commitment) that distinctly shaped younger cohorts' formative experiences (Myers & Cavaness, 2024). While young adults across generations may share some common developmental tasks, the *timing, sequencing, and meaning* of these transitions varies systematically by cohort, demonstrating that generational influences provide valuable insights that are both theoretically and practically significant (Mannheim, 1928/1952; Parry & Urwin, 2011).

As the echoes of the retention crisis reverberate through law enforcement, Generation Z, the first true digital natives (born from 1996 to 2012), steps into the workplace (Dimock, 2019; PERF, 2023). Currently, leaders of many law enforcement agencies acknowledge that they lack understanding and training on how to effectively manage and support the newest generations and are expressing their interest in attracting Generation Z to law enforcement (Cain, 2022; Francis, 2024; Police1, 2022; Scroble, n.d.; Stuckey, 2016). Influenced by values such as work-life balance, technology integration, informal communication styles, and the pursuit of meaningful contributions, they aim not just to join, but to redefine the workforce (Myers & Cavaness, 2024). While policing agencies stand at a pivotal crossroads, embracing innovative strategies and rethinking traditional methods, the integration of

Generation Z into these environments presents unique challenges and opportunities. Law enforcement must not only adapt its workplace cultures to resonate with Generation Z's ideals but also facilitate Generation Z's mutual adaptation to continue to serve their communities in the future (Becton et al., 2014; IACP, 2019; Police1, 2022; PERF, 2023).

At the same time, Generation Z will need to navigate the complexities of a multigenerational workforce, learning to meld their digital fluency, life experiences and skills with the wisdom and experience of older cohorts. This reciprocal adaptation is essential for creating a cohesive and efficient work environment (Akin, 2020). Successfully bridging this generational gap could indeed dictate the future landscape of law enforcement in organizations whose members must be committed to safety for themselves and the people they serve (Jahn, 2016; Wiseman, 2021).

During the first days, weeks, and months of employment, newcomers undergo training and socialization while simultaneously developing connections to the organization (Jablin, 2001). Critical outcomes of this socialization and assimilation process, including commitment and attachment, are established during this formative phase when ties between newcomers and the organization are formed, with results influencing future productivity, satisfaction, and longevity (Myers, 2005b). Organizational culture is communicated to newcomers during socialization (Louis, 1980), familiarizing newcomers with organizational norms and values that enable them to adapt and become effective members. As newcomers coordinate their work alongside tenured employees during this phase, intergenerational interactions become particularly significant in shaping socialization outcomes.

The danger and safety concerns of law enforcement agencies places them in the category of high reliability organizations (HROs), organizations that operate in dangerous

environments that are focused on avoiding errors and catastrophic failures (Roberts, 1989; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). Achieving high reliability requires intensive socialization processes through which newcomers learn strict operational protocols, standardized response procedures, and behavioral norms that prioritize collective coordination over individual discretion (Myers, 2005a; Weick & Roberts, 1993). In HRO contexts, successful integration traditionally depends on newcomers accepting predetermined role definitions and suppressing personal preferences in favor of organizational uniformity, which is a socialization model designed to ensure predictable, error-free performance under dangerous conditions (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001).

However, these HRO expectations may conflict with Generation Z's workplace values emphasizing autonomy, informal peer-like communication, and strong work-life boundaries (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021; Myers & Cavaness, 2024; Schroth, 2019), creating potential tensions that warrant examination. Additionally, despite the critical importance of many types of HROs, little research has linked the recruitment and retention of the generational cohorts and law enforcement through the HRO lens (King, 2009).

The entry of Generation Z into the workforce, presents new challenges and dynamics within this critical environment. This study examines current law enforcement culture and delves into the motivations, aspirations, and concerns of Generation Z individuals who are currently in law enforcement officer careers. I examine Generation Z officer retention within law enforcement agencies from an organizational socialization (OS) lens as their organizational cultures may be adjusting in response to staffing crises and public legitimacy challenges. Rather than assuming a static police culture against which Generation Z values either align or conflict, this research investigates how law enforcement organizational culture

may be evolving, how Generation Z officers are affected in this transformation, and how intergenerational dynamics during socialization shape retention outcomes. By bridging generational studies, socialization, and HRO scholarship, this study offers insights into retention issues and strategies that could address the evolving needs of law enforcement agencies and ensure operational effectiveness within these high-risk organizations.

In conducting this study, I adopt a qualitative methodological approach. By interviewing officers from Generation Z and other generations, I aim to better understand how this generation will integrate into current law enforcement culture. It examines how the generation sees themselves and their career goals relative to a career in law enforcement as well as identify nuanced differences that other generations may have observed while working with this generation.

## **Literature Review**

### **High Reliability Organizing**

High Reliability Organizations (HROs) represent an organizational category spanning critical sectors including aircraft carriers, police departments, hospitals, air traffic control centers, high-rise construction sites, and fire departments (Myers, 2005a). Roberts (1989) coined the term "high reliability organizations" to classify organizations that consistently operated without failures during prolonged operational periods while avoiding adverse impacts on the public and environment. What fundamentally distinguishes HROs from conventional organizations is their constant exposure to danger and unexpected situations, where members must consistently execute duties according to organizational guidelines to ensure safety for themselves and others (Ford, 2018; Jahn, 2016; Myers & McPhee, 2006).

Unlike profit-driven enterprises, HROs prioritize consistent and reliable task execution over generating revenue or producing goods (Kurtz, 2003; Myers, 2005a; Richardson & James, 2017; Scott & Trethewey, 2008). This unique operational focus necessitates institutional-level decision-making rather than individual discretion, given the catastrophic potential of errors (Desmond, 2006). Consequently, HROs require exceptionally high trust levels, both among members and between members and the organization, to enable successful and safe job performance (Desmond, 2006; Jahn, 2016; Kurtz, 2003; Myers & McPhee, 2006; Richardson & James, 2017). To cultivate this supportive internal atmosphere, HROs must understand their internal subgroups and cultures, focusing on how norms, practices, and relationships either facilitate or hinder participation opportunities (Jahn et al., 2018).

Weick and Sutcliffe (2001) established five core principles, shown in Table 1, that define HROs and form the framework for maintaining high reliability in organizational operations. These principles work synergistically to detect and proactively manage issues before they escalate into catastrophic events (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). While all five principles must be simultaneously present for an organization to qualify as an HRO (Weick et al., 1999), mindfulness (also termed organizational learning) serves as the underlying theoretical mechanism that enables these principles to function effectively (Ford, 2018), focusing on the "discovery and correction of errors" (Weick et al., 1999, p. 68), emphasizing continual learning and adaptation within HROs. HROs emphasize uniformity and coordination under stress, where group norms and social trust are vital for reliable performance in dangerous, uncertain environments (Weick et al., 1999). This organizational

imperative creates a culture where newcomers learn crucial behaviors through social cues and embodied practice rather than through manuals alone (Canary & McPhee, 2010).

Critical to understanding HRO reliability is recognizing how strong organizational culture and associated rules are designed to enhance performance reliability in emergency situations, with newcomers quickly learning about norms and the critical importance of following cultural expectations through group interaction (Bierly & Spender, 1995; Myers, 2011; Pascale, 1985; Scott & Myers, 2005). Newcomers initially function as legitimate peripheral participants (Lave & Wenger, 1991), receiving limited access until they gain competence and trust within the workgroup (Canary & McPhee, 2010). However, HROs face a fundamental challenge in distributing organizational knowledge to newcomers: HRO members seldom see the object of their preoccupation—failures, the targets of their work, are rare occurrences (Myers, 2011). This creates a paradoxical condition where newcomers lack contextualized understanding of both the organization and the types of situations they may encounter and how they must respond, which creates a significant challenge in training newcomers, specifically in distributing knowledge about how to respond to accidents (Myers, 2011).

The difficulty stems from the nature of organizational knowledge in HROs, which is largely procedural rather than declarative: consisting of tacit skills, routines, and organizationally specific understandings embedded in context (King & Zeithaml, 2003; Myers, 2011). Organizational knowledge is the knowledge held by members of an organization that is context-specific information and enables members to interpret, make decisions, and act (Droege & Hoobler, 2003). While newcomers receive substantial information through formal socialization programs, a significant amount is learned

informally as newcomers develop social relationships, which plays a critical role in acquiring organizational knowledge and facilitating the assimilation process (Myers, 2005b). As much as 80 percent of what newcomers must learn is tacit knowledge (understood as knowledge that is challenging to put into words), making it difficult to distribute this type of knowledge from more experienced members to new recruits (Goldblatt, 2000; Myers, 2011). Many tacit aspects cannot be taught formally and must be experienced or observed, requiring newcomers to develop sufficient exposure to the culture before they can make sense of and utilize training information as knowledge (Canary & McPhee, 2010). This necessitates socialization beyond formal collective socialization. Formal socialization alone proves insufficient because newcomers continually work to interpret information and acquire knowledge, often transforming explicit knowledge to tacit knowledge according to group- and organizationally-constructed norms (Droege & Hoobler, 2003; Nonaka, von Krogh, & Voelpel, 2006; Myers, 2011).

Consequently, over time interaction provided within the workplace becomes the primary source of knowledge contributing to successful functioning in the organizational environment, not just for newcomers but for experienced members as well (Myers, 2011). As Informal interactions provide access to tacit knowledge through observation, mentorship, mimicry, and storytelling, with peer relationships and trust fostering more open sharing of hard-earned lessons and insider insights (Canary & McPhee, 2010). This informal socialization serves multiple functions: experienced members socialize newcomers by providing training, sharing mealtime discussions about past incidents, and offering guidance to less experienced coworkers (Myers, 2005a). Through these interactions, newcomers learn norms that serve to protect members from harm, including behaviors such as demonstrating

team commitment, dedication to work hard, and an ability to cope with difficult emotional situations in the line of duty (Scott & Myers, 2005; Myers, 2011). Co-creating and distributing organizational knowledge among group members not only increases effectiveness of the individual member but enhances the cohesiveness and value of the entire group (Myers, 2011). This comprehensive approach to error management, cultural transmission, and knowledge socialization through both formal training and informal interactions reinforces the foundation of trust that enables HROs to function reliably in high-stakes environments.

### ***Law Enforcement as an HRO***

Law enforcement operates as an HRO with police departments demonstrating core HRO principles through their high-stakes operations where consistent performance is essential for public safety (Ault & Brandley, 2023; King, 2009). Police organizations exhibit preoccupation with failure through continuous risk assessment and threat evaluation, sensitivity to operations by adapting to real-time evolving situations, and deference to expertise by deploying specialized units and experienced officers in critical incidents (Bye et al., 2019; Klinger, 2020; Law Enforcement Code of Ethics, 2018).

Central to achieving these high reliability outcomes is law enforcement's intensive socialization process, which shapes officers into a cohesive unit capable of collective mindfulness (Coser, 1974; Weick et al., 1999). Law enforcement functions as an institution that seeks to minimize or eliminate conflicting roles and statuses, such as those of family member or civilian friend (Conti, 2011). This totalistic pressure is structurally reinforced during academy training, where recruits are isolated from their previous support systems to

forge a strong singular collective professional identity (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010). In HROs, this intense socialization is often defended as a safety mechanism, creating a *collective mind* in which shared identity ensures consistent, error-free performance in high-stakes environments (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). However, this demand for total identity alignment may create a unique tension for modern recruits who may resist this form of socialization (Myers & Cavaness, 2024). This tension between divestiture socialization demands and individual identity preservation is compounded by structural contradictions within law enforcement organizations.

While police academies attempt reforms toward community policing approaches, paramilitary culture continues to dominate recruit socialization, creating tension between HRO ideals and organizational reality (Ford, 2003). Contemporary societal movements such as "Defund the Police" and "Black Lives Matter" have challenged traditional law enforcement practices, adding external pressure as agencies attempt to maintain high reliability while adapting to changing societal expectations and accountability demands.

### **Law Enforcement in Crisis**

Law enforcement agencies across the United States are experiencing a documented recruitment and retention crisis. Following high-profile incidents culminating in the 2020 George Floyd protests, officer resignation rates were the highest they have ever been historically (Mourtgos et al., 2022). This accelerated a trend already underway: by 2019, researchers had documented a decade-long decline in officer applicants (PERF, 2019), and by 2023 agencies formally declared a "recruitment and retention crisis" (PERF, 2023). For more than a decade, police departments have grappled with shrinking applicant pools,

escalating resignations, heightened competition among agencies for lateral transfers, and an impending wave of retirements (PERF, 2019; PERF, 2023; Wilson, 2012).

This crisis carries operational consequences, as research demonstrates relationships between officer staffing levels and crime rates (Kovandzic & Sloan, 2002; Levitt, 1997; Mello, 2019). It also imposes substantial financial burdens for the agencies given the significant investment required to train new personnel (Hilal & Litsey, 2020). Critically, generational differences have emerged as a leading factor in retention challenges, with newer cohorts demonstrating different patterns of organizational commitment than historically seen (Jain, 2020; PERF, 2023). Understanding how Generation Z officers experience OS within this crisis context becomes essential for developing effective retention strategies.

### **Socialization of Law Enforcement Officers**

Organizational socialization describes the process through which newcomers acquire the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume organizational roles, transitioning from outsiders unfamiliar with norms, procedures, and culture to insiders with proficient understanding of internal workings (Louis, 1980; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). New employees who actively engage in their integration process achieve better outcomes than those who remain passive, with proactive behaviors including information seeking, relationship building, positive framing, and role negotiation (Dideon et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2022).

A key outcome of OS is assimilation, the mutual acceptance of newcomers into organizational settings involving continued negotiation and adaptation between newcomers and incumbents (Jablin, 2001; Myers & Oetzel, 2003). Myers and Oetzel (2003) identified six dimensions through which assimilation occurs: familiarity with supervisors,

organizational acculturation, recognition, involvement, job competency, and role negotiation. Importantly, assimilation is bidirectional: organizations work to influence and socialize members, while members simultaneously make efforts to individualize their roles and negotiate expectations. Relationships and reciprocal interactions between newcomers and established members are crucial for shaping this process (Gailliard et al., 2010).

### ***Socialization in High-Reliability Organizations***

Socialization may function differently in organizational contexts where coordination failures prove catastrophic. HROs face unique challenges because their dangerous work environments require members to trust that coworkers will perform predictably during emergencies (Weick, 1987; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). Unlike organizations that focus socialization outcomes primarily on productivity and efficiency, HROs emphasize member reliability, which is a necessary condition for building trust among coworkers in dangerous occupations (Weick, 1995; Weick & Roberts, 1993). The necessity for predictable, coordinated action in high-stakes situations may constrain the extent to which newcomers can negotiate their roles.

Myers (2005a) conducted a foundational study of organizational assimilation in an HRO context, examining how newcomers integrated into a large metropolitan fire department. Her findings revealed significant departures from assimilation patterns observed in conventional organizations. Firefighters demonstrated five of the six assimilation dimensions identified by Myers and Oetzel (2003); familiarity with others, organizational acculturation, recognition, involvement, and job competency, but notably did not engage in role negotiation. Myers argued this absence was functional rather than problematic: HROs

require substantial conformity because coordination failures prove catastrophic, and role negotiation conflicts with the standardization necessary for reliable emergency response.

Three features of Myers's (2005a) study are particularly relevant for understanding HRO socialization. First, the fire department operated under conditions of extreme labor surplus. Approximately 4,500 individuals applied annually for 40-50 positions (a 1% acceptance rate). This selectivity allowed the organization to choose only candidates demonstrating complete cultural alignment. Second, successful candidates engaged in extensive pre-entry self-socialization, spending months in fire stations before applying, participating in ride-alongs, and observing operations. By the time they were hired, newcomers had already demonstrated their acceptance of organizational culture. Third, turnover was virtually nonexistent: in 16 years, only three firefighters had left for other employment. Those who could not accept the demands of the "humble boot" role, characterized by low status, heavy workload, and complete deference to senior members, self-selected out before formal entry.

Within the fire department, probationary firefighters ("booters") were expected to be "seen and not heard." The paramilitary structure "all but eliminates role negotiation in most crew-level roles" (Myers, 2005a, p. 372). Recruits were taught to perform all duties "according to the CCFD way," with even mundane station tasks following uniform procedures enforced through nearly continuous surveillance. More experienced firefighters granted trust when newcomers demonstrated deference, commitment, and hard work ethic, behaviors suggesting they could be relied upon to perform predictably in dangerous situations. Myers (2005a) suggested this represented a scope condition for organizational

assimilation theory; whereas workers in non-HRO contexts can negotiate roles to align work with personal values, HRO members cannot engage in such negotiation because doing so would undermine reliability mechanisms essential to safe operations.

### ***Role Negotiation***

Role negotiation represents a critical dimension of organizational assimilation through which newcomers and organizations mutually define membership terms (Myers & Oetzel, 2003). Miller et al. (1996) conceptualized role negotiation as interaction through which individuals seek to modify organizational expectations for how a role is performed and evaluated. Rather than passively conforming to predetermined expectations, employees signal their professional identities through communicative positioning, such as the stories they tell, the expertise they claim, or the values they express, and attempt to incorporate pre-existing competencies into organizational roles (Davies & Harré, 1990; Scott & Myers, 2010).

Van Maanen and Schein (1979) identified three role components that employees may negotiate: knowledge base (problem-solving repertoires), strategic base (logics for selecting solutions), and mission (the role's purpose relative to organizational goals). They recognized that some employees maintain roles as prescribed (custodial responses) while others fundamentally redesign them (role innovation). Role negotiation fundamentally involves employees attempting to perform work in ways that preserve their personal sense of self (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). When organizational role expectations conflict with personal identity, employees experience value dissonance that can undermine commitment and increase turnover intentions (Schaible & Gecas, 2010). Research on officers voluntarily

resigning from police service reveals that they experienced damaged and conflicting identities when organizational role expectations could not be reconciled with personal identity (Charman & Tyson, 2023). The conditions enabling the fire department in Myers' (2005a) study to function without role negotiation where; extreme labor surplus, extensive pre-entry self-socialization, and near-zero turnover, which may not hold for HROs facing different labor market dynamics.

Law enforcement exemplifies these challenges while introducing additional complexities. Police work combines dangerous situations requiring coordinated action with substantial discretionary authority exercised by individual officers in unpredictable circumstances (Van Maanen, 1973, 1975). Officers must balance organizational expectations with personal values while managing public perceptions and community relationships, all within traditionally rigid paramilitary structures (Paoline, 2003). Recent scholarship suggests that newer generational cohorts entering into the workplace approach role negotiation with different expectations, demonstrating patterns of challenging authority early in tenure rather than waiting to establish organizational standing (Myers & Cavaness, 2024). When organizations maintain strong role definitions requiring conformity, these cohorts may perceive negotiation as blocked, which may trigger earlier departure rather than prolonged adaptation (Land, 2021).

### ***Organizational Identity and Psychological Contracts***

Whether and how role negotiation occurs connects to how members conceptualize their relationship to the organization. Specifically, whether they view their occupational role as central to their identity or as one role among many (Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker &

Burke, 2000). This distinction carries implications for organizational commitment and retention outcomes.

Traditionally, strong organizational cultures, particularly in HROs, typically demanded "totalistic" commitment: exclusive loyalty where organizational membership becomes the primary identity (Coser, 1974; Conti, 2011; Hinderaker, 2015). Police academy training historically reinforced this totalistic pressure, as recruits became more isolated from previous support systems (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010). In HROs, this identity integration was understood as both demonstrating dedication and enabling the cohesion necessary for coordinated action under dangerous conditions (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001, 2007). However, strong occupational identity carries psychological costs. When employees view their work role as their core identity, they may demonstrate more availability and strong commitment, but this same integration may prevent psychological distance from work-related stress and trauma (Ault & Brandley, 2023).

These identity dynamics operate within the framework of psychological contracts, understood as the implicit, unwritten beliefs employees hold about reciprocal obligations between themselves and their employers (Rousseau, 1995). Rousseau distinguished between relational psychological contracts, characterized by open-ended loyalty-based relationships emphasizing long-term commitment and socio-emotional exchange, and transactional psychological contracts, marked by bounded exchanges with explicit time horizons and emphasis on economic rather than emotional elements. Employees operating under transactional contracts view employment as a more limited-duration arrangements, maintaining boundaries between work and personal domains, and they evaluate

organizational membership based on whether tangible obligations are met (Berman & West, 2003; Rousseau, 1995).

Research demonstrates broader societal shifts driving generational transitions from relational to transactional psychological contracts (Anderson & Schalk, 1998; Guest, 2004). Older generations entering the workforce during periods of organizational stability developed relational contract expectations emphasizing loyalty and long-term identification (Lub et al., 2016). Younger generations experiencing economic volatility and witnessing organizational downsizing developed more transactional expectations, focusing more on work-life balance and conditional commitment (Lyons & Kuron, 2013). These differences may create intergenerational tensions when older employees perceive younger colleagues' bounded commitment as insufficient loyalty, while younger employees view older colleagues' unconditional dedication as irrational sacrifice.

Within law enforcement, psychological contract differences prove particularly consequential because traditional police culture was built on assumptions of relational contracts. Organizational practices such as intensive academy training, field training officer mentorship, and after-hours socializing functioned to create relational bonds where officers viewed policing as lifelong vocational callings (Van Maanen, 1973). The challenge for contemporary law enforcement involves recognizing that retention mechanisms effective for employees operating under relational contracts may alienate employees operating under transactional contracts who interpret these same practices as violations of appropriate work-life boundaries (Schaible & Gecas, 2010). The intersection of identity framing and psychological contracts raises important questions for HRO socialization. If newer cohorts

enter with transactional psychological contracts and employment, traditional socialization mechanisms designed to produce relational contracts and totalistic identification may prove ineffective or counterproductive. Understanding how these dynamics operate in contemporary law enforcement contexts, particularly given the labor market inversions that distinguish current conditions from those documented by Myers (2005a), has important implications for both understanding organizational assimilation and practical retention strategies.

## **Culture**

Organizational culture serves as both the context and medium through which socialization occurs, fundamentally shaping whether newcomers successfully integrate (Jablin, 2001). Assimilation involves the gradual process through which individuals learn and internalize organizational culture, including appropriate behaviors, communication styles, and decision-making processes. This process is interactive: individuals shape culture just as they are shaped by it (Bencherki et al., 2022; Scott & Myers, 2010). Culture is conveyed through various communicative practices including formal documents, stories and myths, rituals and ceremonies, and physical symbols, creating identity, belonging, and behavioral expectations (Gardner et al., 2021).

Organizations vary in cultural strength (the degree to which members share values, beliefs, and behavioral norms) (Gochhayat et al., 2017). Strong cultures are characterized by high consistency, unified identity, and intensive socialization mechanisms that transmit cultural knowledge across generations of members (Schein, 2004). In HRO contexts, strong cultures serve operational functions: shared mental models enable coordinated action under

pressure, while collective identity creates the trust essential for members who depend on one another in dangerous situations (Weick & Roberts, 1993). Such commitment manifests through expectations that members prioritize organizational membership above family relationships, outside friendships, and personal interests (Conti, 2011). In exchange for this commitment, organizations provide identity, belonging, and the intense cohesion members often describe using kinship language, such as "family" and "brotherhood" (Schein, 2004). The psychological contract underlying strong cultures assumes members will sacrifice work-life boundaries in exchange for lifetime membership and organizational support.

### ***Law Enforcement Culture***

Law enforcement organizations have historically maintained strong cultures characterized by paramilitary structures, hierarchical authority systems, and deeply embedded institutional norms (Kearns, 2007; Segovia, 2024). Understanding police culture becomes critical when examining retention, as alignment between individual values and organizational culture relates to officer commitment and turnover intentions (Abbott, 2024; Skibba, 2018; White et al., 2022). The socialization of new officers occurs through both formal training mechanisms and informal cultural transmission, creating a complex process of identity formation and value negotiation (Boivin et al., 2020; Van Maanen, 1973).

During academy training and field experiences, recruits are exposed to the profession's core cultural elements, including the "us versus them" mentality distinguishing law enforcement from civilian populations (Boivin et al., 2020). Police culture is further characterized by masculine norms privileging emotional control, physical capability, and unwavering commitment to the organization and fellow officers (Brown et al., 2019; Rabe-

Hemp, 2008). Traditional socialization mechanisms, including intensive academy training, field training officer mentorship, and informal after-hours gatherings, which function to create the relational bonds through which officers come to view policing as a lifelong vocational calling rather than simply employment (Schaible & Gecas, 2010; Van Maanen, 1973).

These cultural characteristics served identifiable organizational functions. In contexts where coordination failures can result in officer deaths or civilian casualties, cultural mechanisms emphasizing hierarchy, conformity, and mutual trust address operational requirements (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). The "us versus them" orientation, while potentially problematic for community relations, creates the in-group solidarity essential when members must trust one another with their lives. Informal socializing outside work hours builds the tacit knowledge and shared understanding that cannot be transmitted through formal training alone (Myers, 2005a; Swap et al., 2001).

### ***Cultural Change Under Crisis***

However, organizational cultures (even strong ones) are not static. Institutions are dynamic systems subject to both intentional reform efforts and emergent processes of evolution, with change occurring through variation in adoption, resistance, and reinterpretation of practices (Scott, 2010). Cultural transformation in organizations typically occurs gradually, as established practices are incrementally modified through accumulated small changes (Burnes, 2004; Scott, 2010). However, crises can accelerate cultural change by disrupting the mechanisms through which culture is normally reproduced (Lewin, 1947; Weick & Quinn, 1999).

HROs face particular challenges during periods of change because their emphasis on error prevention and standardized procedures can conflict with the flexibility required for adaptation (Weick, 1987). This tension between reliability, which suggests standardization and continuity, and the need for innovation creates distinctive dynamics in HRO contexts undergoing transformation. When external pressures force rapid adaptation, organizations may find that practices which served reliability functions become difficult to maintain, creating uncertainty about how to preserve essential coordination capabilities while adapting to new circumstances.

Law enforcement organizations face additional complexity because their cultures developed under specific labor market conditions that may no longer hold. Traditional police culture assumed conditions of labor surplus: when applicants vastly outnumbered positions, organizations could maintain demanding socialization requirements and expect cultural conformity (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010; Van Maanen, 1978; Coser, 1974). Practices such as extended probationary periods, intensive informal testing of newcomers, and expectations of total organizational commitment were sustainable when the organization could afford to lose those unwilling or unable to meet these demands (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010; Conti, 2011).

Under conditions of labor scarcity, however, practices that filter out uncommitted candidates become potentially counterproductive when organizations cannot afford to lose any recruits. The ability for agencies to adapt their cultural norms may determine their success in retaining officers whose values and expectations differ from previous generations (Alan, 2020; Segovia, 2024). However, cultural transformation in policing remains contested:

organizational climate (employee perceptions of actual management practices) often diverges from stated organizational values, and the paramilitary foundation of police culture creates institutional resistance to evolution (Fenn & Bullock, 2021; Hall et al., 2016). Whether and how law enforcement organizations can adapt strong cultures while preserving the coordination capabilities essential for HRO operations remains an open question with implications for retention.

### ***Organizational & Occupational Identity***

Organizational identification describes the degree to which individuals define themselves in terms of organizational membership (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Identity is not fixed but actively constructed through ongoing cognitive, behavioral, discursive, and emotional efforts that individuals use to form, repair, maintain, and revise their sense of self in organizational contexts (Brown, 2021; Workman-Stark, 2024). Role theory provides a framework for understanding how individuals relate their sense of self to occupational positions. Stets and Burke (2000) and Stryker and Burke (2000) distinguish between incorporation of a role into self-concept versus occupying a position while maintaining self-concept boundaries. This distinction carries implications for organizational commitment: individuals who fully incorporate occupational roles into their identity demonstrate greater alignment with organizational goals and stronger resistance to leaving, while those who maintain boundaries between self and role preserve psychological flexibility but may demonstrate weaker organizational attachment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Occupational identity refers to an individual's emotional attachment to their profession, reflecting the internal connection between self-concept and work role (Wang &

Yang, 2022). Individuals viewing themselves through several occupational lenses simultaneously, may demonstrate greater flexibility in navigating conflicting demands than those whose identity centers on a single role. This flexibility may prove particularly relevant in occupations facing public scrutiny or delegitimization. For example, law enforcement officers whose identities center exclusively on being a police officer, may experience criticism as direct threats to their sense of self, while those maintaining diversified identities may preserve self-worth by drawing on alternative role anchors.

Certain occupations that function as totalistic organizations permeate members' lives more deeply than traditional workplaces, shaping values, identities, and relationships in profound ways (Hinderaker, 2015). Exit from totalistic organizations is non-linear and typically emotionally difficult because deeply internalized identities make role exit particularly challenging, often involving prolonged inner conflict, concealed doubts, and fear of judgment or rejection (Hinderaker, 2015). As a totalistic occupation, law enforcement traditionally has been understood not merely as employment but as an identity that shapes how officers view themselves and their relationship to the world (Charman & Tyson, 2023; Hinderaker, 2015). Police officers have historically described themselves as part of the "blue family," viewing their occupation as "a job for life" with strong expectations of loyalty and belonging (du Plessis et al., 2021).

Viewing oneself as being a police officer rather than working as one, historically served organizational functions in HRO contexts in which total commitment was understood as enabling the cohesion necessary for coordinated action under dangerous conditions (Weick, 1987). For Generation Z officers, occupational identity formation presents

distinctive challenges because their generational values, including work-life balance, mental health awareness, and resistance to all-encompassing organizational demands, may conflict with traditional expectations that policing constitute a totalistic identity (Myers & Cavaness, 2024; Skibba, 2018). Therefore, understanding how contemporary officers negotiate occupational identity becomes essential for addressing the retention challenges facing law enforcement organizations.

### **Intergenerational Interactions**

Generations form around shared consciousness shaped by historical events, economic conditions, technology, and family structures that influence workplace values and behaviors (Mannheim, 1928, 1952). Eyerman and Turner (1998) suggest that generational cohorts sustain themselves by preserving collective memories encompassing foundational experiences, key historical and political events, and predominant characteristics and ideologies. Social forces (including historic events, economic environments, technology, and parenting structures) serve as essential mechanisms for transmitting values and expectations across generations (Ryder, 1965). As generations integrate into the workforce, they bring broader values and expectations that shape their workplace behavior and career choices, with organizational environments acting as platforms for the generational transmission of values and resources (Joshi et al., 2011).

Currently, the American workplace comprises four generational cohorts: Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964), Generation X (born 1965-1980), Millennials (born 1981-1995), and Generation Z (born 1996-2012), each shaped by unique historical experiences that created divergent workplace values and communication preferences. For this study,

intergenerational interactions refer to exchanges and collaboration between employees from different age groups. These dynamics become particularly salient during OS, as supervisors and senior leaders from older generations communicate values, skills, and resources to younger employees through formal training and informal interactions (Joshi et al., 2011). In law enforcement, where officers typically retire between ages 50 and 57, Baby Boomers are largely absent from the workforce, making Generation X the primary cohort responsible for socializing Generation Z newcomers.

Organizational knowledge moves between age groups through knowledge creation, transmission, retention, and learning processes during intergenerational exchange (Kuyken & Costanza, 2024; Myers, 2010; Starbuck, 1992; Swap et al., 2001). Since organizational knowledge resides not only in explicit information but also in tacit expertise, routines, and social capital built through experience (Starbuck, 1992), generational differences in values can create misunderstandings that strain socialization relationships and complicate knowledge transfer (Kuyken & Costanza, 2024). The role negotiation process through which newcomers reconcile personal identities with organizational expectations becomes particularly complex when those expectations reflect the values of older generations rather than those of incoming cohorts (Charman & Tyson, 2023; Miller & Manata, 2020).

Generational characteristics create both opportunities and friction points in workplace interactions (Joshi et al., 2011). Table 2 summarizes key workplace values and communication preferences across the four generational cohorts currently in the workforce, revealing differences that shape intergenerational dynamics. Younger cohorts typically prefer informal digital communication while older generations value face-to-face interaction, with these mismatches potentially contributing to workplace stress, reduced job satisfaction, and

strained relationships, particularly when power differentials exist between younger subordinates and older supervisors (Han, 2021; Macovei & Martinescu-Bădălan, 2022). Meanwhile, Bencsik et al. (2016) found that older generations systematically judge younger workers more negatively on traits like intelligence, motivation, and work ethic, judgments that may misinterpret generational communication differences as professional deficiencies. In law enforcement contexts, in which hierarchical structures reinforce power distance and veteran officers occupy supervisory positions, these generational communication mismatches may be amplified, potentially affecting both operational coordination and relationship quality between younger officers and their supervisors.

## **Generation Z**

Generation Z, born between 1996 and 2012, represents the most racially and ethnically diverse generation in American history (Dimock, 2019; Pichler et al., 2021). Their formative years were shaped by the Great Recession, school shootings, climate activism, political polarization, and the COVID-19 pandemic, events that cultivated both resilience and anxiety (Parker & Igielnik, 2020; Myers & Cavaness, 2024). Smartphones were introduced in 2007 when the oldest members were eleven years old, making this generation uniquely accustomed to continuous internet access and digital communication (Twenge, 2023).

Generation Z experienced upbringings characterized by protective parenting and digital platforms fostering more peer-to-peer rather than intergenerational communication, and limited workplace exposure through less part-time employment than previous generations (Center for the Digital Future, 2012; Fry & Parker, 2018; Strom & Strom, 2015; Turkle, 2012). Strom and Strom (2015) document a trend of adolescents increasingly

communicating with same-age friends while communication with relatives and other adults declined, leaving Generation Z with less practice navigating intergenerational relationships than previous generations. Meanwhile, protective parenting limited exposure to failure, ambiguity, and autonomous decision-making, while shaping feedback expectations: rather than encountering critical assessment, they received more consistent positive feedback (Twenge, 2023).

Generation Z prioritizes purpose-driven work aligned with social consciousness, flexibility, work-life balance, and respect for ideas over hierarchical rank (Gabriellova & Buchko, 2021; Myers & Cavaness, 2024; Pichler et al., 2021). They favor instant messaging over traditional communication forms such as email (Milmo & Packham, 2023; Percy, 2023), while desiring close, peer-like relationships with supervisors that reflect their informal upbringing communicating with adults (Raslie, 2021; Schroth, 2019). Generation Z demonstrates more individualistic orientations than Millennials, preferring autonomous work, while simultaneously desiring frequent supervisory feedback (Gabriellova & Buchko, 2021; Pichler et al., 2021). For Generation Z adults, the workplace now represents their primary setting for sustained intergenerational interaction. When Generation Z expresses shared values through different communication styles, older generations may interpret these behaviors as unprofessional or lacking commitment, creating mutual misunderstanding that strains intergenerational cohesion (Bencsik et al., 2016; Twenge, 2023).

These intergenerational dynamics take on particular significance in law enforcement contexts. Limited research on Generation Z officers suggests they are motivated by intrinsic factors including community service, social impact, and enacting social change for racial equality and fairness (Abbott, 2024). Yet, Generation Z's widespread distrust of police

institutions, cultivated through witnessing highly publicized incidents of police violence, shapes their reluctance to consider law enforcement as a viable career path, however Generation Z members who do join are motivated by wanting to change negative perceptions (Abbott, 2024).

## **Retention**

Retention vulnerabilities compound across organizational levels. Individual challenges with identity authenticity, interpersonal tensions within the organization, and societal pressures from community relations interact, creating multiplicative pressures that intensify turnover risk (Charman & Tyson, 2023; Lentz, 2022; Segovia, 2024; White et al., 2022). Traditional HRO models rely on high levels of organizational identification to ensure high-reliability performance (Myers, 2005a). However, Generation Z enters the workforce with a preference for maintaining boundaries between their professional duties and their personal lives (Myers & Cavaness, 2024). Millennial officers already show significantly lower organizational commitment than Generation X officers, particularly regarding promotion, supervision, and job satisfaction (Sharp, 2016). This could produce a shift in how younger generations approach law enforcement careers, with a "try it and leave" pattern distinct from older generations' conceptualization of policing as lifelong vocational calling (Abbott, 2024), especially as Generation Z has been found to job hop every 2-3 years in search of organizations whose values match their own (Bureau of Labor, 2022). However, law enforcement agencies are not structured for such turnover patterns, as departments face high costs and significant time investments to train new personnel (Hilal & Litsey, 2020; Orrick, 2008, 2018). Therefore, this study investigates how law enforcement organizational

culture is responding to retention pressures and how generational dynamics shape these processes:

*RQ1: How is law enforcement organizational culture evolving in response to the retention crisis, and what role do Generation Z officers play in this transformation?*

While RQ1 examines how law enforcement culture is evolving in response to the retention crisis, understanding whether and how culture is evolving requires examining the agents and mechanisms of potential change. This cultural inertia is reinforced by generational dynamics, as officers responsible for socializing Generation Z may resist the changes this cohort represents. Generation X officers, now more likely to be in supervisory and management roles, may have psychological investment in the traditional socialization processes through which they successfully integrated (Ashforth, 2001; Joshi et al., 2011).

Meanwhile, we know that older generations may systematically judge younger workers more negatively, misinterpreting generational differences as professional deficiencies (Bencsik et al., 2016; Jansen et al., 2021). These layered sources of resistance, structural, psychological, and generational, create complex cultural terrain that Generation Z officers must navigate during organizational entry and adjustment. Intergenerational workplace interactions become the critical mechanism determining Generation Z's integration and commitment. Therefore, I ask:

*RQ2: Given potential changes in law enforcement culture, how do intergenerational workplace interactions shape Generation Z officers' organizational socialization experiences, and retention?*

## **Methods**

### **Research Design and Approach**

This study employs a qualitative methodology to explore the perceptions and experiences of law enforcement officers regarding retention challenges from a generational perspective. The rationale behind this choice is rooted in the limited existing knowledge regarding Generation Z's entrance into HROs, particularly in law enforcement (King, 2009; PERF, 2023). Given the scarcity of research in this context, I took an inductive and interpretive approach. This qualitative method provides a nuanced exploration, enabling the emergence of new patterns and understanding, allowing for in-depth exploration of officers' thoughts, motivations, challenges, and aspirations. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews enabled me to probe deeper into relevant topics while accommodating the emergence of unforeseen themes. This approach can yield theoretical as well as practical insights that could identify solutions for retention issues in law enforcement.

This study adopts a pragmatic epistemological stance (Tracy, 2018), viewing interviews and observations as sites where meaning is co-constructed between researcher and participant while simultaneously recognizing that participants' accounts reveal genuine patterns about their organizational experiences. This balanced approach acknowledges that while my presence and questions shaped how officers articulated their experiences, the patterns they described reflect organizational realities that exist independent of our specific interactions. This pragmatic orientation proved particularly well-suited to my research questions about cultural evolution and retention, which required both honoring officers' subjective sense-making about their careers and identifying structural patterns across

multiple accounts that individual participants may not have recognized. By treating interviews as collaborative knowledge-construction while maintaining that organizational dynamics operate beyond any single conversation, I could analyze how officers interpret their experiences while also examining broader forces shaping those experiences.

## **Participant Selection**

I conducted 37 semi-structured interviews with law enforcement officers from a department on the West coast, with interviews lasting on average 57 minutes. These interviews occurred with Generation Z officers (N=16), Millennials (N=10), and Generation X (N=11) officers working within the department, allowing for comparative analysis of perspectives on retention issues (see Table 3 for participant demographics). Participants held various roles within the law enforcement agency, with interviews conducted with officers from command staff, uniform patrol, criminal investigation (CID), crime scene investigation (CSI), training, and special operations. This allowed for diverse perspectives across different specializations and age ranges within law enforcement. During the same period, I also conducted 22 interviews with custody deputies (officers who work in the jail). Although these interviews are not included in the present study, custody deputies frequently discussed patrol deputies in comparison to themselves, providing valuable contextual information about current issues affecting patrol. My rationale for including custody deputies in the data collection process was primarily pragmatic, I had access to both groups, and the department requested a practical report summarizing key strengths and areas for improvement across the organization. To meet this request, I interviewed both patrol and custody deputies to provide as comprehensive a report as possible. While the direct findings from the custody group are

not analyzed here, their responses offered an important point of comparison with patrol deputies, enriching my understanding of the organizational dynamics at play. Ultimately, these data were excluded from the current analysis to maintain focus and scope, consistent with my committee's recommendation that the study not become too broad.

## **Procedure**

Prior to initiating formal interviews, I engaged in approximately 30 hours of ethnographic observation within the department. This immersion phase began with an invitation from the department to attend recruitment events and participate in initial meetings at headquarters, designed to familiarize me with the organization and introduce me to potential participants. Throughout the data collection period, I conducted multiple ride-alongs with officers and received walk throughs of department facilities such as their jails. This observational component provided valuable contextual understanding of the work environment, daily routines, and organizational dynamics that informed the interview process and subsequent analysis. Throughout the data collection period, I conducted multiple ride-alongs with officers and received walk throughs of department facilities such as their jails.

During ride-alongs, I occupied an observer role (Junker, 1960), accompanying officers as they responded to calls for service while minimizing my involvement in operational activities. I typically sat in the passenger seat of the patrol vehicle, taking handwritten notes on interactions between officers, their radio communications, and their approaches to various situations. Between calls, officers and I engaged in informal conversations about their experiences, career trajectories, and perspectives on departmental dynamics. I audio-recorded brief field note summaries immediately after each ride-along

when feasible, transcribing these recordings into more detailed typed notes later the same day. This observation component served primarily to build rapport with officers and gain experiential familiarity with their work environment rather than as a primary data source, though observational insights informed my interview questions and helped me interpret officers' accounts with greater contextual understanding.

Generation Z individuals were initially randomly invited for interviews from an internal department list, from which the department sent them an email asking if they would be interested in participating in the study. From this initial group, I conducted snowball sampling where participants who completed the study informed their colleagues about it, who then reached out to me directly or through the department's HR team. Officers from other generations were contacted either through the initial snowball sampling or through responses to separate department-wide emails from the HR team inviting participation for the study.

To schedule the interviews, I created an online calendar on which participants could select a time at their convenience. Interviews were conducted on-site at the department, online via Zoom video conferencing or through a phone call. Approximately 65% of interviews were conducted online either over the phone or via Zoom, with 35% conducted in person. Interviews were semi-structured and they included open-ended questions developed to explore participants' perceptions, motivations, and concerns related to the research questions, see Appendix A for Generation Z interview protocol, and Appendix B for other generation interview protocol. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes to two and a half hours. The questions asked of the Gen Z officers were mirrored and tailored for officers from other

generations. This parallel structure allowed for a comparative analysis of generational dynamics within the department. I encouraged free discussion to capture authentic, unfiltered insights, employing prompts as needed to delve deeper into specific areas of interest.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study received ethical approval from the University's Institutional Review Board, ensuring compliance with all ethical guidelines and regulations relevant to research involving human participants. The confidentiality of participant data and the ethical treatment of all participants were prioritized throughout the research process. Prior to each interview, participants were briefed on the study's objectives and methods, including how their data would be managed, stored, and reported. I explained the IRB approval process in detail, emphasizing the legal and ethical protections governing their participation, which likely contributed to officers' willingness to speak candidly without requesting material exclusion. All officers provided verbal consent for participation and audio recording at the start of each interview, and I explicitly reminded them of their right to withdraw or skip questions at any time. No participant chose to withdraw during interviews, though several mentioned appreciating the consent reminder.

Interviews occasionally surfaced sensitive topics that participants raised spontaneously, including experiences with trauma exposure, burnout, and suicidal ideation. When officers disclosed such experiences, I practiced what Tracy (2013) terms "active ethical reflexivity", listening attentively to what they chose to share while deliberately not probing for additional details that could cause further harm. By allowing officers agency over which sensitive topics to discuss and how deeply to explore them, I balanced my research

interest in understanding retention challenges with ethical obligations to minimize potential psychological risk. This approach meant that some interviews yielded rich data on mental health challenges affecting retention while others did not address these topics, reflecting participants' autonomous decisions about disclosure rather than my imposition of a standardized question set.

To protect participant confidentiality, all officers were assigned pseudonyms and identifying details were removed in transcripts. Audio recordings were stored on encrypted, password-protected platforms throughout the research process, anonymized immediately upon transcription with personal identifiers removed, then transcribed, cleaned, and corrected. This resulted in 576 pages of single-spaced data. When presenting preliminary findings to department leadership, I deliberately used only aggregated trends rather than individual quotes, preventing any possibility of identifying participants based on distinctive phrasing or perspectives. This approach honored officers' trust while still providing the department with actionable insights. These multi-layered confidentiality protections proved particularly important given that some officers shared critiques of departmental policies, leadership decisions, or colleague behaviors that could potentially affect their careers if attributed to them individually.

### ***Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity***

Qualitative research requires acknowledging how the researcher's social position, background, and experiences shape data collection and interpretation (Tracy, 2013). My positionality as a 25-year-old white woman conducting research in law enforcement carried implications for access, rapport, and the types of information participants shared. As a

member of Generation Z myself, I occupied a unique position relative to my participants: I was a peer to the youngest officers I interviewed, yet an outsider to the occupational culture they inhabited. This generational proximity likely facilitated rapport with Generation Z officers, as we shared formative experiences and cultural reference points that shaped our worldviews. However, this same proximity required conscious analytical distance to avoid overidentifying with Generation Z perspectives or inadvertently privileging their accounts over those of older officers.

While I am female and policing is a very male-dominated profession, male officers did not appear to filter their perspectives on gender dynamics in law enforcement; several explicitly discussed challenges they perceived regarding women in policing, suggesting they did not view me primarily as a woman but rather as a researcher occupying a different professional domain. Conversely, female officers may have felt more comfortable discussing gender-specific experiences, such as unwanted attention from male colleagues or navigating pregnancy and family planning, with a female researcher.

Access to the department was facilitated through a professional connection I made while working with a nonprofit organization serving incarcerated individuals. This connection led to an introduction to a department commander, who subsequently connected me with Human Resources. HR leadership championed the project to command staff and played a central role in recruitment by generating a list of all Generation Z officers, from which I randomly selected ten for initial contact. HR sent recruitment emails explicitly framing these officers as "randomly selected" volunteers who could participate during duty time, which conferred organizational legitimacy to the research and likely increased

participation rates. The department's institutional support meant that officers generally approached interviews with a baseline level of trust rather than suspicion. To build credibility beyond this organizational endorsement, I explained my prior exposure to law enforcement contexts, including serving on a police oral board and conducting research with State Park peace officers, while emphasizing my academic expertise in organizational communication and generational workplace dynamics. Officers appeared to view my expertise as complementary rather than competing: they possessed operational knowledge of policing while I offered scholarly frameworks for understanding intergenerational interactions and organizational change. No participant questioned my legitimacy as a researcher despite my outsider status, suggesting that the organizational framing combined with my academic credentials established sufficient credibility.

Throughout data collection and analysis, I engaged in reflexive practices to manage potential biases stemming from my positionality. I maintained detailed analytical memos documenting instances where my own generational values or gender might influence interpretation, and regularly consulted with my advisor about these concerns. For example, as someone who values work-life balance, I needed to consciously guard against interpreting Generation Z officers' boundary-setting behaviors as inherently positive while framing Gen X officers' total occupational commitment as problematic. By maintaining awareness of how my demographic characteristics and values shaped the research process, I worked to produce analysis that represented multiple perspectives while acknowledging that my particular standpoint inevitably influenced what I observed, how participants responded to me, and how I interpreted their accounts.

## **Data Analysis**

For this investigation, a phronetic iterative qualitative data analysis process was utilized, incorporating an iterative process that interweaved empirical data and theoretical dialogue (Tracy, 2019). This involved an abductive, problem-based approach that alternated between: 1) data collection, 2) examining emergent findings from the data, and 3) consulting existing literature and guiding research interests (Tracy, 2018).

The data analysis process began with an informal review of the completed transcripts to identify common themes related to the research questions. Throughout the interviews, I generated approximately 600 pages of handwritten notes, marking particularly significant insights, compelling quotes, and noteworthy perspectives with stars, bold text, or other visual indicators. Immediately following each interview, I documented my overall impressions and key insights while the conversation was still fresh in my mind.

After completing all interviews, my research assistants and I systematically reviewed these notes, compiling a consolidated list of all highlighted observations. This process created a focused reference document containing the most significant themes and insights from each interview. For any handwritten sections that proved difficult to interpret, the research team collectively worked to decipher and clarify the content. This preliminary analysis served to refresh my recollection of key insights and informed our subsequent formal coding process in Atlas.ti.

After this preliminary analysis, the interviews were transcribed and uploaded to Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software platform. This software facilitated coding and

thematic analysis, allowing for the identification of patterns in participants' feelings, facts, and opinions.

A constant comparison approach guided three general stages of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding involved identifying recurring themes related to the research questions including generational similarities and differences, career perception, and retention experiences, while also exploring the text for underlying values, perspectives, and thought processes; see Appendix C for a list of initial code book. In this initial stage, research assistants and I read through the transcripts and individually marked them for noteworthy quotes and tentative themes such as “For one day I forgot my boots, it was a whole thing. A boot flew out of the truck that I was carpooling in. One of the guys from [other agency] lent me his boots. Otherwise, we'd all get screwed. Just a ride-or-die type of feeling for everyone. Unless you've been in the academy, there are things you will never understand.”, which we coded as Examples/Stories, Organizational Belonging & Cultural & Moral. In doing this, the data was reviewed line-by-line and tentatively assigned codes corresponding to categories or themes related to the research questions.

To ensure coding reliability and consistency, 15 research assistants were organized into groups of three, where every individual within a group coded the same transcript. Upon completing their independent coding, each group convened to discuss their reasoning for specific code assignments. These consensus-building meetings followed a structured protocol designed to ensure both coding reliability and conceptual clarity. Research assistants began by comparing their coded transcripts side-by-side, identifying sections where all three

members had applied identical codes. These areas of agreement were documented first, establishing a foundation of shared interpretation.

Next, the group turned attention to passages where coding diverged. For each discrepancy, research assistants took turns explaining their rationale for code application, referencing specific language in the transcript that informed their decisions. The group collectively evaluated whether differences stemmed from legitimate interpretive variance (e.g., a passage genuinely addressing multiple themes) or from inconsistent understanding of code definitions. When discrepancies reflected ambiguity in the codebook, the group consulted the code descriptions (found in Appendix C) and discussed how the participant's actual words aligned with or departed from the conceptual boundaries of each code.

Through this deliberative process, groups resolved most coding differences by reaching consensus on the most appropriate code application. In cases where a passage legitimately addressed multiple themes, research assistants assigned multiple codes and documented the reasoning. When uncertainty persisted despite discussion, these unresolved sections were flagged for review in weekly meetings with me. During these meetings, the research assistants highlighted similarities across individual coding decisions and deliberated on sections where their coding differed. Based on these discussions, each group created a master document reflecting the consensus of the group, which served as the official coded version of that transcript.

This collaborative approach provided an additional level of methodological rigor by ensuring consistent interpretation of codes across transcripts. To prevent the development of isolated coding systems within individual groups, group compositions were regularly rotated

so that research assistants worked with different peers throughout the analysis process. For example, a research assistant who coded Transcript 1 with Partners A and B would code Transcript 4 with Partners C and D, then Transcript 7 with Partners E and F. This rotation strategy further strengthened the reliability of the coding framework by exposing potential biases or inconsistencies in code application across different team configurations and ensuring that interpretive norms developed through group consensus remained consistent across the entire dataset.

The initial open coding process generated 33 codes (see Appendix C) applied across 3,405 coded quotations. Code frequency varied substantially, revealing which themes dominated participants' accounts and which represented more limited but theoretically important patterns. The most frequently applied codes included *Examples/Stories* (486 instances), *Generational Differences* (378 instances), *Satisfaction and Meaning from Work* (369 instances), *Problems/Issues* (305 instances), and *Generation Z characteristics* (301 instances). When very few new codes were emerging from the open coding process, the research progressed to secondary cycle coding (axial coding). This stage involved grouping smaller first-level codes into hierarchical categories, identifying codes that were related to each other, and examining how they addressed the research questions (Tracy, 2019). Code co-occurrence patterns revealed thematic clusters that became the foundation for organizing findings. For example, passages coded as *Work-Life Balance* (Code 14, 181 instances) frequently co-occurred with *Generation Z* (Code 15a, 301 instances) and *Organizational Commitment* (Code 24, 122 instances), suggesting these codes represented related dimensions of a broader pattern where boundary-setting behaviors both protected officers from burnout while potentially weakening the affective commitment mechanisms. Similarly,

codes addressing *Culture & Moral* (Code 2, 233 instances), *Generational Differences* (Code 15, 378 instances), and *Training & Development* (Code 19, 172 instances) clustered together in passages describing organizational transformation, revealing how cultural change was being transmitted through modified training content and shifting intergenerational workplace expectations. Codes related to *Satisfaction and Meaning from Work* (Code 4, 369 instances), *Organizational Belonging* (Code 17, 69 instances), and *Peer to Peer* (Code 8, 117 instances) formed another cluster illuminating how officers' sense of occupational identity and connection to colleagues influenced their retention decisions.

The final stage of selective coding involved identifying the central concepts that emerged from the data and developing theoretical connections between these concepts. This process focused on understanding how the coded themes related to the study's research questions about organizational culture evolution (RQ1) and intergenerational workplace interactions (RQ2). Through iterative review of coded passages and analytical memo-writing, I identified overarching patterns such as the distinction participants drew between "Old Culture" and "New Culture," generational differences in psychological contracts (relational vs. transactional), and the shift from identity framing ("I am a cop") to employment framing ("I work in law enforcement"). Within the broader *Generational Differences* code, sub-themes emerged including differential approaches to overtime, divergent expectations for explanation-seeking versus deference, and contrasting attitudes toward after-hours socializing. The *Culture & Moral* code revealed sub-themes distinguishing traditional practices (hazing, alcohol-centered bonding, emotional suppression) from emerging practices (wellness programs, peer support, work-life boundaries).

Through this iterative analytical process, several interconnected patterns emerged from the 576 pages of interview transcripts and observational field notes. The findings that follow address the study's two research questions, which proved deeply intertwined: understanding how law enforcement organizational culture is evolving in response to the retention crisis (RQ1) requires examining the intergenerational workplace dynamics (RQ2) through which that transformation both occurs and is experienced by different generational cohorts.

## **Findings**

This study's two research questions are interconnected toward understanding how the organizational culture of law enforcement is evolving and the impact on members. The first research question, *(RQ1): How is law enforcement organizational culture evolving in response to the retention crisis, and what role do Generation Z officers play in this transformation?*, necessarily involves examining the intergenerational dynamics that both drive and reflect that evolution. The second research question is *(RQ2): Given changes in law enforcement culture, how do intergenerational workplace interactions shape Generation Z officers' organizational socialization experiences, and retention?* The findings section begins by establishing the foundational context: the Old Culture and New Culture that participants across all generations explicitly identified and contrasted. This cultural framework emerged so consistently and prominently in the data that it provides the essential backdrop for understanding both the retention crisis and Generation Z's role within it. Participants discussed their socialization experiences, role negotiation, or retention decisions in relation to this cultural shift, positioning their experiences *within* this transformation.

Therefore, I respond to RQ 1 within this context, by exploring how Generation Z perceives and is adapting to the law enforcement culture from this framework.

Following this cultural foundation, I examine how intergenerational workplace interactions shape Generation Z officers' socialization experiences and retention decisions *within the context of* this evolving culture to respond to RQ2. Throughout the findings, I demonstrate how the cultural dimensions identified in the first section inform the interpersonal dynamics, role negotiation processes, and retention mechanisms addressed in the second.

## **Culture**

The first research question asked how the organizational culture is evolving in response to the retention crisis and how Generation Z is playing into this transformation. A remarkable finding emerged from the interviews: participants across all generations, ranks, and years of service explicitly distinguished between what they termed the “Old Culture” and “New Culture.” This distinction was not presented as typical generational differences or gradual organizational evolution, but rather as recognition of a fundamental cultural shift that has occurred within recent years. The terminology itself was striking, nearly every participant used the words “old” and “new” to describe these cultural paradigms, speaking about these differences as if they were obvious and universally understood within law enforcement. While organizational culture encompasses multiple interconnected dimensions, I next illustrate this cultural shift through examples and quotes, revealing how cultural dimensions have shifted in these areas and operate simultaneously to shape organizational life.

### ***Transforming the Old Culture***

To answer the first research question regarding how law enforcement culture is evolving, I first describe what participants called "Old Culture." Participants across all ranks and generations did not describe this as a vague past, but as a specific, coherent historical era characterized by four reinforcing mechanisms: hazing during initiation, culture of deference, drinking and bonding outside of work, and emotional suppression. This culture functioned as a totalistic system; an organizational socialization approach characterized by comprehensive institutional control over members' professional and personal identities (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979) designed to test commitment through endurance.

### ***Hazing as Gatekeeping***

The Old Culture was defined by ritualized hazing practices that served as gatekeeping mechanisms for group membership. These were institutionalized tests of subordination. Ken (Gen X) characterized this era as a "gold boy system" with standard operating procedures that would currently result in termination.

A universal marker of this culture was the physical exclusion of new officers. Frank (Gen X) described being at the "tail end" of this era, recalling that "if you were a brand-new deputy and the team went out to go for lunch, they would tell you to wait in the car." This practice communicated a clear social reality: newcomers were operationally necessary but socially illegitimate until they had "earned" their place. Diego (Gen X) bluntly summarized the behavioral norm of this period: "they did treat new people like dog shit". Yet participants consistently described these experiences not as permanent exclusion but as a rite of passage, wherein newcomers who endured were eventually welcomed into the group. The harshness of the initiation period was understood to give way to acceptance, creating a shared ordeal that bonded cohorts together. Patrick (Millennial) reflected on how these practices have evolved

in law enforcement, noting a fundamental shift in the nature and purpose of newcomer treatment:

“I didn't think there is at least enough good-natured hazing, if you know what I'm saying. I'm not saying being mean, or anything crazy, like what they used to do, but just some form of making you feel like you're the new guy, but we like you enough to try to make you part of it, a little type of initiation stuff. I don't feel like there's enough of that.”

Patrick's observation reveals an important distinction between hazing as exclusionary punishment and initiation as inclusive bonding. His comments suggest that while harmful treatment has diminished, some officers perceive a loss of mechanisms that once facilitated group cohesion and tested newcomer commitment. Many officers communicated the belief that these rituals served organizational functions within the Old Culture, cultivating what participants termed a "familial bond" through shared ordeal.

First, participants framed hazing as a trust-building mechanism. Collen (Gen X) articulated this logic: "You come in, you look for work, you do as you're told... You earn your respect. It doesn't come." This perspective reframes hazing as a proving ground for commitment, where respect was a privilege gained through demonstrating work ethic and deference rather than granted with the badge. This framing allowed officers to recast these practices as character-building experiences that sorted the committed from the uncommitted.

Second, hazing served as a filtering process to identify officers unsuited for the profession's demands before they endangered others. As Alex (Gen Z) explained about historical hazing practices: "after [they had] weeded out the people who aren't gonna make

it... then it would get more fun." This selection logic prioritized ensuring that only those with a strong commitment would persist through the entry process.

However, these functional justifications must be understood within their organizational context. The Old Culture operated under conditions of labor surplus, when applicants vastly outnumbered positions, organizations could afford to lose candidates who could not endure hazing or initiation practices. Sam (Millennial) captured this dynamic:

"In the old-school way...you would have hundreds of people applying for a position and maybe two get hired. Those two come in and they want this job because... they were the ones selected. They're going to put in the work, they're going to grind, they're going to do whatever it takes to get this position."

Sam's description reveals how scarcity created self-selection: only the most committed would persist through demanding application processes and subsequent hazing rituals. The abundance of applicants provided organizational latitude to prioritize commitment and cultural fit over simply filling positions. However, the current retention crisis has inverted this calculus. Brock (Millennial) articulated the stark contrast:

"Not only do we have, like, much fewer numbers, but it seems like the quality of applicants are kind of just altogether much lower. And I think that probably just goes with the numbers thing, because you have a smaller pool to choose from...we're always short-staffed. We're always understaffed."

Brock's observation highlights how labor scarcity has transformed organizational priorities. Where the Old Culture could afford to "weed out" candidates through demanding initiation processes, today's staffing shortages force organizations to prioritize filling vacant positions over maintaining rigorous filtering mechanisms. This shift renders traditional

hazing practices not merely ethically questionable but potentially organizationally counterproductive, as losing recruits who might struggle with intense initiation rituals represents a luxury that departments may no longer be able to afford.

### ***Culture of Deference***

Socialization in the Old Culture was predicated on the silencing of the newcomer. The Old Culture operated through unquestioned obedience. Ken (Gen X) described his early socialization experiences with striking clarity: “I was 20 years old, I showed up to work and they're like, 'Hey kid, shut the fuck up. Do what we tell you to do. There's a reason behind all of this, you don't necessarily always need to know it.” Ken's account reveals more than communication style, it captures a strategy designed to establish hierarchy and eliminate questioning. Additionally, Collen (Gen X) mentioned that when he was being socialized, “there was a lot more reverence, I guess, given to people who have been doing this a lot longer...the paramilitary rank structure, and the communication up and down the rank structure was much more strict.”

This communication pattern enforced a learning model where observation replaced dialogue. Isaac (Millennial) explained that he understood his role was to "shut my mouth, work hard, be 'a sponge' and soak up all the information I could." Isaac's metaphor of the sponge is telling, since sponges absorb passively, without filtering, questioning, or reshaping what they take in. This unidirectional information flow reflects what Van Maanen and Schein (1979) termed a "custodial" response to socialization, where the primary goal is replication of existing norms rather than adaptation or innovation. Which Eric (Gen X) highlights from when he was taught when he was new ““This is your spot and this is your role. Stay that

way.'" This communicative pattern ensured that the Old Culture reproduced itself across time, transmitted through deference rather than negotiated acceptance.

Connor (Gen X) exemplified this Old Culture mindset when stating, "We made sure our guys were up to par. We had that mindset. A lot of the military guys have a mindset that is a certain way... we support each other. We're a team." Yet other senior officers recognized that unquestioned obedience came at a cost, and that the newer workforce brought knowledge that veterans lacked, particularly regarding updated laws, tactics, and academy training. Frank highlighted how things have changed and as a training officer what he is now telling his new trainees,

"We are going to learn as much from you as you are going to learn from us. It's been several years [since] some of us have been to the academy. You just came out. You're fresh, you know all the new things that we need to know. All the 'ways' that we've improved over the years. I need you to be able to speak up and tell us something different."

While traditionally the culture of deference prohibited questioning authority, particularly from newcomers, a fundamental shift has occurred in what constitutes legitimate inquiry during socialization. Generation Z officers expect explanations for directives rather than accepting orders without understanding their rationale, a pattern that challenges decades of hierarchical training practices. Zane (Millennial) contrasted his own experience with how he now trains recruits: "I was told, 'You don't ask why. You just go do it because I'm telling you to'...whereas I've kind of flipped it around and I try to explain the 'why' of why we do things to the new recruits...because I find that if they understand the 'why' of the issue is better." His explicit reversal from the practice that did not offer explanation demonstrates

conscious rejection of the deference model, suggesting that explanation-seeking has become not only acceptable but pedagogically valuable. Thomas (Gen X) traced the evolution to changing workforce demographics: "For years, law enforcement, I don't think was looked at necessarily as much of a profession. I think it was more of a working class job, if you will...as that job started to get more applicants that are college educated. They're educated, they want to know the 'why' of things." As recruiting shifted from predominantly military veterans to college-educated applicants, the workforce brought academic socialization patterns: questioning, analysis, understanding principles, that conflicted with military-style command structures requiring unquestioning obedience.

Critically, this pattern appeared across multiple generational cohorts. Henry (Gen X) recognized the shift during his military service with Millennials before encountering it again with Generation Z: "somewhere like, I don't know, oh, eight-ish, we started having problems with the young kids, and it was the Millennials, to me seemed like they just wanted to know 'why' they were going to do something, yeah, which fucking annoyed me, because it was the military. But I was like, you take three minutes, you tell this asshole why we're doing this, and we could all move on with our day." His initial resistance gave way to pragmatic adaptation where brief explanations facilitate rather than impede operations. His experience across both cohorts confirms this represents a societal trend rather than developmental stages. However, Millennial officers who adapted to providing explanations still expressed frustration when Generation Z intensified this expectation beyond seeking understanding. Julio (Millennial) described the escalation: "sometimes we get frustrated that there's people that are like, 'Well, why are we doing it this way? This doesn't seem right.' Or, 'Hey, I want to do it this way.' We don't really have time to negotiate which way we're going to go." With

this quote we can see how Generation Z moved beyond passive understanding through asking 'why' as the Millennials would, but now challenging not just the absence of rationale but the rationale itself.

Meanwhile, from Generation Z's perspective, questioning established practices serves protective functions given changed operational and social contexts. Kaleb (Gen Z) explained his skepticism toward veteran advice: "some of the guys that I look up to will either ascribe less importance to a certain thing or element of this job, or they'll be like, 'Well, why don't we just do it this way because I did it like this 20 years ago.' Well, what they did 20 years ago does not necessarily align with how the laws are now and more importantly, how the perceptions are now." His concern reflects more than resistance to tradition but rather that historical practices may violate current legal standards or public accountability expectations. Additionally, other Generation Z officers echoed this protective skepticism. Quentin (Gen Z) questioned historical methods: "There's stuff they would tell us about in the 80s and the 90s that cops were doing. We're like, 'Why would you even think to do that?'" Alex (Gen Z) articulated concerns about excessive force: "Like 'Why did you need to knock him out first? He was already drunk.' It's like, 'You're the reason people hate us now.'" Alex directly connects outdated tactical approaches to contemporary policing crises, which aligns with the life experiences that this generation has lived through. These questioning patterns created interpersonal challenges beyond tactical disagreements for some members of Generation Z, as Francesc (Gen Z) described, "there are also those times when people are just so much older than me that I then say or do things like 'What does that mean?' or 'Why are you saying that?' and I just feel like sometimes it's hard to bond with those people."

This transformation from prohibited to anticipated questioning alters socialization dynamics. Where the Old Culture reproduced itself through newcomers absorbing practices without understanding their rationale, contemporary officers require explanations that reveal reasoning behind procedures. This potentially produces officers who understand principles underlying tactics rather than simply replicating behaviors. However, it also introduces friction during knowledge transfer when senior officers lack time or patience for extensive explanation, or when the honest answer, "this is how we've always done it", proves unsatisfying to analytical newcomers.

### ***Alcohol and Bonding***

The Old Culture featured essential informal socializing outside of formal work hours that served critical functions for both individual socialization and organizational reliability. In the Old Culture, this essential bonding was almost exclusively centered around alcohol consumption. Diego (Gen X) stated the expectation bluntly: "Cops are known for drinking a lot." Zane (Millennial) described the distinctive character of these gatherings, recalling how after getting off work "at six o'clock in the morning," senior officers would invite him to "go drink some beer in that abandoned parking lot." These alcohol-centered gatherings simultaneously reinforced group solidarity, transmitted tacit cultural knowledge, and integrated newcomers, functions that organizational culture scholars identify as fundamental to establishing shared identity and maintaining strong cultures (Hatch, 1993; Schein, 2004; Smircich, 1983).

For newcomers, these gatherings operated as crucial gatekeeping mechanisms that signaled provisional acceptance into this strong culture. Zane (Millennial) recalled a pivotal moment of inclusion when an officer he "really admired" handed him a beer, grabbed him

"around the shoulders," and invited him to join the group's backyard barbecue. Though Zane "stayed quiet" because he was "still the 'new guy,'" being included in informal conversations about "gossip within the agency" marked his introduction to insider status.

However, participation in these alcohol-centered rituals was not merely social, rather it also carried professional consequences. Oscar (Gen X) reflected on how his decision not to participate affected his career trajectory: "I don't really keep friends in law enforcement... I have no desire to hang out with people after hours... And honestly, because I don't have that after hours beer mentality, it's also hurt me severely in my career." This highlights how opting out was interpreted as lacking organizational commitment, regardless of operational competence. In an occupation where members depend on one another in dangerous situations, the refusal to build social bonds after hours was read by some peers as a signal about an officer's reliability. Yet while these rituals successfully built the cohesion essential for HRO operations, they simultaneously entrenched problematic coping mechanisms that undermined long-term officer well-being. Sam (Millennial) articulated the organization's selective moral framework, noting the "old-school mentality" that forbade cannabis use "because it's going to make you crazy, but it's okay to drink yourself into depression, hopefully not drinking yourself into suicide, but we allow that." Frank (Gen X) confirmed that alcohol served as the profession's primary coping strategy: "You're going to change for the worse... alcohol is probably one of the biggest things that folks in this profession will use."

However, the data reveals a shift in how younger officers, specifically Generation Z, view after-hours socialization. Rather than viewing invitations to socialize as pathways into

the "ingroup," they increasingly see them as intrusions on personal time, or as extensions of work rather than genuine social connection. This aligns with Generation Z's documented emphasis on work-life balance (Gabriellova & Buchko, 2021). Collen (Gen X) described this perspective shift: younger officers view policing as "a job" where "my whole social network is separate. I don't spend time with anyone from work outside of work." Patrick (Millennial) observed the decline firsthand, describing how his squad's ritual of grabbing "a six pack so we each have one beer" for "25 minutes on our Friday" had essentially disappeared: "they definitely start moving away from that pretty quickly. And nobody really does that anymore."

This pattern aligns with broader societal trends showing Generation Z demonstrating significantly lower drinking rates than previous generations (Miech et al., 2024; Saad, 2025). Generation Z officers articulated clear intentions to maintain separation between work and personal life. Brad (Gen Z) stated simply, "All of my friends outside of work aren't cops." Ben (Gen Z) explained the reasoning many echoed: maintaining friendships outside law enforcement allows him to "talk about other worldly things" and avoid becoming trapped where "work is 24/7." Omar (Gen Z) similarly emphasized wanting "that break from law enforcement on my days off, so that way I'm not constantly thinking about the job." These officers explicitly referenced observing previous generations' experiences. As Brock (Millennial) pointedly asked older officers: "you did this for 30 years and you ruined two marriages. Like, can't you empathize with somebody that maybe they don't want to do that and they want to maybe balance it a little bit better?"

Senior officers often interpreted this withdrawal as a breakdown in cohesion essential for operational safety. Collen (Gen X) lamented the loss of connection: "It's pretty disharmonious, and it doesn't lead to the connections on the squads. There's no like after

work beers like there used to be... that doesn't seem to happen with this generation." This tension reveals competing interpretations: senior officers perceive rejection of informal socializing as threatening reliability, while younger officers reject what they view as unhealthy coping mechanisms masked as team building. While this relates to the culture changes relevant to RQ1, this also connects to RQ2, highlighting generational differences and tensions in interactions during socialization.

Collen (Gen X) offered one explanation for this generational difference, noting that when he started, officers "had to be physically present with other people" to maintain social connections, whereas officers now "30 and below" remain "connected to all their high school friends" and "college friends" through social media: "They didn't have to go make a new social group because... that same social group that they've had their entire life still exists on the internet." Patrick (Millennial) observed that for Generation Z, "they have alternative stuff for social situations... you don't need alcohol to be social." William (Millennial) suggested the benefits of maintaining outside relationships, explaining that officers who "maintain relationships outside of work and hobbies outside of work" avoid becoming "100% 'cop' all the time," which can prevent them from becoming "always 'turned on', always 'wired.'" These competing perspectives, of senior officers viewing after-hours socializing as essential to operational trust and newcomers viewing it as an intrusion on personal well-being reflect a fundamental tension about how workplace relationships should be built and maintained in law enforcement. What remains unclear is whether the on-shift interactions that replace informal socializing can serve the same bonding and knowledge-transfer functions that after-hours gatherings historically provided.

The data reveals a pattern of gradual generational transition in socializing norms. Roman (Gen X) captured this shift, acknowledging that "choir practice" [referring to the afterhours socializing and drinking] had "absolutely gone away" but recognizing the benefit: "it means people are going home to their families." This transition shows Generation X largely complying with divestiture socialization values, Millennials serving as a bridge generation holding slightly divergent sentiments while still participating in the rituals, and Generation Z more fully enacting the rejection of these practices.

For instance, Millennials still participated in informal socializing and drinking, understanding it as part of the process. In contrast, when Generation Z officers receive invitations that once signaled acceptance, they now respond differently. Wilson (Millennial) recounted inviting Generation Z colleagues to "come hang out" for drinks and barbecue, only to receive responses like: "No disrespect, I'd love to come hang out... but I leave my work life at work, and when I'm out of here, I want to spend time with my family. I don't want to spend time with people from work." While Wilson highlighted that he personally values spending time with work colleagues, he accepts this boundary-setting. This also relates to RQ2, by demonstrating differences in generational values and how this is affecting intergenerational interactions.

This shift carries organizational ramifications. What was once viewed as being a "team player", signing up for voluntary overtime, has declined among the newest generation. Aaron (Millennial) elaborated on this cultural difference, explaining that while older generations operated under a "if you get called you step up and do it" mentality, younger officers might decline overtime by saying "I'm going to go hiking on Saturday and I don't

want those plans ruined." Aaron acknowledged that older generations interpret this as laziness, though he understood the younger generations reasoning.

This declining willingness to volunteer for overtime creates tangible operational challenges for agencies already facing chronic staffing shortages. When fewer officers volunteering for shifts, departments must either mandate overtime, which further strains work-life balance and may accelerate burnout among those compelled to work additional hours, or operate understaffed, potentially compromising response times and service delivery to communities. The shift also reflects broader patterns of declining organizational commitment among younger cohorts (Sharp, 2016). If this pattern is extended with Generation Z, agencies may face a fundamental recalibration where the informal social contract, of officers providing discretionary effort in exchange for career advancement and organizational belonging no longer functions as it did for previous generations. This also connects to RQ2 as well, by highlighting the different psychological contracts that generations hold and how it is affecting workplace interactions.

Roman (Gen X) captured the fundamental dilemma: "I think the key is to figure out the healthy way to build that camaraderie and that feeling of team and family without the choir practice and the unhealthy way that it was done in the past." He acknowledged the tension: "you don't have the team building that we had, but it's incredibly healthy that they're not going out and drinking alcohol after work... that they're getting rest, that they're exercising." Whether agencies can develop alternative bonding mechanisms remains an open question with direct implications for both operational safety and retention.

### ***Emotional Suppression ("Machismo")***

The Old Culture maintained norms around emotional expression that shaped how officers processed the psychological demands of their work. Nick (Gen X) characterized this period as a "Culture, then, I would say was more 'machismo'...very 'keep your emotions locked in' type of era, now, I see it, feel it, and hear that a lot of wellness has now been incorporated into our culture, where people look after each other." These expectations operated as professional standards where officers understood that in the Old Culture, acknowledging stress or trauma could be interpreted as lacking the emotional fortitude required for the job.

Wilson (Millennial) confirmed that formal support mechanisms were incompatible with these cultural expectations: "the peer support aspect, that was frowned upon for years. You didn't talk about your problems." Without socially accepted sanctioned outlets for processing traumatic experiences, officers developed informal coping strategies. The alcohol-centered socializing described earlier served a dual function: it facilitated team bonding while simultaneously providing the primary venue where officers could collectively process difficult calls and traumatic incidents. As Flora (Millennial) put it, "It's just a uniform and for a person's liberty to be taken away. So once you take off this uniform, go home. If you have family or friends, you just don't share the emotions with them." This pattern persisted across multiple generational cohorts, suggesting these practices functioned as organizational coping mechanisms. The pairing of emotional suppression norms with alcohol-based informal processing created a system where officers could maintain professional composure during operations while having spaces together to decompress afterward, a pattern that appeared to serve operational needs even as it carried long-term psychological costs.

Generation Z officers' approach to work-life separation introduces different protective mechanisms, which as Henry (Generation X) put it "they're emotionally separating church and state." Rather than making sense of the psychological demands of the job through after-hours gatherings with colleagues, especially younger officers described maintaining clear boundaries between their professional experiences and personal lives, leaving work at work and relying on non-law-enforcement relationships and formal wellness resources for support. This represents a shift in coping frameworks: where the Old Culture processed trauma through collective informal gatherings centered on alcohol consumption, the emerging approach emphasizes formal wellness resources and boundary maintenance. The organizational challenge involves preserving the team cohesion and mutual support functions that informal socializing provided while developing alternative mechanisms that align with contemporary officers' wellness frameworks and do not rely on alcohol consumption as the primary bonding and processing mechanism.

### ***Drivers of Change***

What emerged from participant accounts is recognition that the Old Culture persisted across decades as an institutionalized system. Officers described these practices as "the way things always were," with hazing rituals, off-duty socializing usually centered around drinking, and emotional suppression norms transmitted through formal and informal socialization. These practices served identifiable organizational functions.

Emotional suppression enabled officers to maintain operational focus during repeated trauma exposure, preventing immediate breakdown even as it accumulated long-term costs. Hierarchical deference ensured rapid compliance during critical incidents. This cohesion manifested in language of kinship: "this sense of brotherhood" (Eric, Gen X), a "family

outside of family" (Edgar, Gen Z). However, as Sam (Millennial) observed, "right now, you can kind of see this shift in what we can maybe call, 'old school patrol'... then, there's this new way of doing things, right. Where we're at right now is kind of in this middle area of 'the shift'." This highlights how this shift has only begun to occur more recently.

### *The 2020 Convergence*

These practices persisted for decades and served organizational functions, but now a critical question emerges: why did this shift occur now? A pattern emerged when participants discussed the timing of cultural transformation: while there were longitudinal issues, such as the long-term recruitment and retention crisis putting pressure in the background, however there was a more sudden shift that occurred. Collen (Gen X) captured this: "I think that Trayvon Martin kind of started it. And then when you get to George Floyd, oh, we're super high up against the not liking law enforcement. And then you get to the riots during COVID, and I think that's when there was a correction." The year 2020 represents not merely another challenging period for law enforcement, but rather a convergence of crises that disrupted many of the mechanisms through which organizational culture had been transmitted across generations. What made 2020 different from previous difficult moments was that multiple simultaneous pressures of a public legitimacy crisis, operational disruption, and resource constraints, which eliminated the socialization processes that had reproduced the Old Culture for decades.

George Floyd's death in May 2020 created an immediate shift in how officers approached their work, transforming public perception and introducing fears that altered officer behavior. Henry (Gen X) explained:

"Then George Floyd happened. At the same time, COVID happened, and there was a cultural shift from being on the streets, being in the community that you patrol, to staying in the station, almost being afraid of bad guys because you were afraid of a lawsuit. Or going to jail or being called a racist. And so these young kids, in my opinion, they're afraid of their shadow. They're not willing to do the job that used to be done "

This captures a dramatic transformation from proactive community engagement to increasingly reactive response, that alter what it means to be an officer. While policing has always involved both proactive and reactive elements, the balance may be shifting toward the latter, with officers moving away from less self-initiated enforcement activities (traffic stops, field interviews, proactive patrols) towards responding more to dispatched calls, a more service-oriented model that also minimizes officers' discretionary decisions and thus their exposure to potential scrutiny. As Sam (Millennial) describes: "a lot of younger guys are kind of like, 'Yeah, I don't want to stop a lot of cars because if I get threatened for using force, and that gets challenged in court. Why do I want to defend my actions?'...if this goes badly and I end up in court, is it worth the risk?" This risk-benefit calculus may be shifting routine police work into a series of cost-benefit decisions, with younger officers particularly attuned to how their discretionary actions might generate complaints, lawsuits, or viral videos. The Old Culture's emphasis on proactive enforcement, of stopping suspicious vehicles, conducting field interviews, maintaining visible presence became professionally dangerous in an environment where every interaction could carry potential career consequences.

Additionally, the pandemic created what officers call a "training gap generation." William (Millennial) explains:

"During COVID we had a whole generation get hired that had very minimal contact with individuals of the public because we were worried about spreading COVID...When COVID was over and things started opening up again, we had a whole hiring gap that was like, 'Oh wait, this is how we handled this?' and we're like, 'Yeah, this is how we handled it, we went and dealt with people.' We didn't phone call everybody, we went to the scene and engaged the people face to face."

This disruption had two critical implications. First, Generation Z officers learned hands-off policing as their introduction to the career. Second, COVID normalized distance not only from the public but from coworkers. The informal socialization mechanisms transmitting Old Culture norms of post-shift conversations, ride-alongs, and physical presence in shared spaces were eliminated precisely when a new generation was learning the profession.

An additional event during 2020, that officers highlighted having a large impact was the *Defund the Police* movement, which translated external political pressure into internal organizational constraints. As Quincy (Gen Z) noted, "there was a lot of initiative to defund the police. So the positions that I initially put in for were not there, so they had to withdraw and rescind. At that point, I was recruited to work for [former] company that I had worked for before this. So I worked there instead." This highlights how this movement had a significant impact on police departments internally, with budget cuts, eliminated positions, and disrupted career trajectories, impacting an already strained job creating even further staffing crises. Which as William (Millennial) highlighted, "trying to make up for that time with one generation retiring, then we have a big gap in years...agencies across the board are

paying for that time when they just didn't have the budget to hire folks. Now we're playing 'catch up'”.

What made 2020's convergence particularly consequential was its timing: it occurred precisely when a generational cohort was entering the organization. Generation Z's professional identity formation and initial socialization happened under fundamentally different conditions than any previous cohort. While older generations learned policing through immersive, observation-based socialization with immediate feedback from veterans, Generation Z learned through more formal, structured, even virtual training with limited informal interaction. Unlike experienced workers who can draw on previous organizational knowledge and established relationships when navigating disruption, early-career workers like Generation Z officers had no pre-existing baseline. Therefore, Generation Z officers represent not simply a new cohort that entered the workforce during a difficult period, but also a cohort whose fundamental understanding of what policing *is* differs from all previous generations.

Thus, 2020's convergence created external pressures affecting internal practices while simultaneously introducing a generational cohort to be socialized into them. This convergence highlights RQ1's question of how organizational culture is evolving and Generation Z's role in this transformation. While many participants discussed the retention crisis (88 coded instances), the retention crisis created long-term background pressure, but the 2020 events of George Floyd's murder, COVID-19, and the Defund the Police movement provided the catalyst that made traditional cultural practices operationally challenging to maintain.

The timing of Generation Z's entry means that these officers began their careers when divestiture socialization mechanisms were not functioning in traditional ways when senior officers couldn't conduct ride-alongs as often, when informal gatherings were prohibited, when the organization itself was questioning established practices in response to public scrutiny.

Regarding RQ2's focus on how intergenerational workplace interactions shape Generation Z's socialization experiences and retention, this context explains why intergenerational dynamics became particularly complex. Generation Z officers experienced limited intergenerational interactions during their critical entry phase. COVID's impact on Generation Z officers extended beyond the 1.5-year pandemic period due to law enforcement's exceptionally long training pipeline. From initial application to full officer status, the process spans approximately 18-24 months: application and screening, background checks, physical fitness testing, polygraph examination, psychological evaluation, conditional job offer, six months of academy training, four months of field training with a senior officer, and 12-18 months of probationary status. This meant COVID disrupted the critical socialization phases of not only officers who entered during 2020, but also those who began the process in 2018-2019 and were navigating academy training, field training, or probation when the convergence of crises occurred. Meaning that the Generation Z officers interviewed for this study had progressed through this lengthy pipeline to reach patrol status. However, even these officers remained in active socialization phases years into their careers. Xavier (Gen Z) recalled being told upon completing field training: "Wait five years. It takes five years to be able to show up to any scene and know exactly what to do." Nick (Gen X) emphasized that "five years isn't enough to gain that institutional knowledge." This extended

timeline means Generation Z officers interviewed even those several years into this career path were still acquiring cultural knowledge and building relationships with senior colleagues, making their disrupted entry conditions particularly consequential for ongoing organizational integration. As a result, many Generation Z officers entered lacking the shared reference points with senior colleagues that previous cohorts had developed through informal socialization.

### **Socialization and Retention**

While RQ1 examines how law enforcement organizational culture is evolving in response to the retention crisis, organizational culture does not transform autonomously, it changes through the communicative practices of organizational members (Schein, 2004). In law enforcement contexts, senior officers serve a central role of cultural transmission, wielding authority over newcomer socialization through both formal training roles and informal mentorship relationships (Van Maanen, 1973; Myers, 2005a). Therefore, understanding Generation Z retention requires examining not merely whether culture is changing (RQ1), but also; *(RQ2) How the intergenerational workplace interactions shape Generation Z officers' organizational socialization experiences, and retention?* The data revealed three patterns through which intergenerational dynamics influence retention: (1) mentorship dynamics (2) job as employment, not identity; and (3) shifting psychological contracts.

### ***Mentorship Dynamics***

Senior officers consistently expressed concerns that staffing pressures have forced the organization to accept candidates who would not have qualified under previous standards. Connor (Gen X) articulated this concern: "what they're looking for to fill the void and what is

actually needed are two different things...they've relaxed the standards so much in hiring, oh my god, people that they wouldn't have touched 10 years ago, they will absolutely fly through the process now." Whether these concerns reflect actual competency differences or differing expectations about what constitutes as "quality," they produce tangible consequences for socialization. When senior officers question whether newcomers possess necessary capabilities, informal mentorship relationships may become strained. Collen (Gen X) observed that "there's not a lot of mentoring going on at the mid-career level for the new kids... instead our kind of new kids [are] teaching our new kids, which is what's currently happening." As well as Brock (Millennial) who observed tensions: "A lot of the older guys right now, they're a little more closed off to the younger generation...And one of the big things is 'I've been here for 20 years, and you've been here for two...You're going to leave like everybody else leaves'. This pattern represents a self-reinforcing cycle: senior officers, frustrated by watching younger officers depart after brief tenures, become less willing to invest time and effort in informal mentorship, which in turn may accelerate departure. With reduced consistent mentorship Generation Z officers receive less exposure to the informal knowledge, operational wisdom, and tacit understandings that previous generations acquired through sustained interaction with veterans.

Generation Z's behavioral patterns create additional barriers to intergenerational contact. As described earlier, Generation Z officers demonstrate reduced participation in the two primary mechanisms through which officers traditionally built relationships across squad boundaries: voluntary overtime and after-hours socializing. During regular shifts, officers work exclusively with their assigned squad members, typically 4-6 individuals. However, historically, officers expanded their organizational networks by volunteering for overtime

shifts (working with different squads) and participating in informal gatherings where cross-squad relationships developed. However, with Generation Z's limited participation in these mechanisms, driven by their emphasis on work-life boundaries, means they have substantially fewer opportunities for additional intergenerational contact. This creates fewer touchpoints where cultural knowledge, operational experience, and professional norms can be transmitted informally.

Additionally, socialization tensions are compounded by divergent reasons for entering law enforcement. Collen (Gen X) described a pattern he found troubling:

"I think some of the young people coming in have a negative view of law enforcement... I'll ask them in the intro meetings, 'Hey, why did you guys become cops?' And I've had multiple people in the last two and a half years say to my face, 'I joined because I want to help. I want to turn law enforcement around and make it better.' And they don't even realize that they're saying it to the people that they think are doing it wrong."

This exchange reveals fundamentally different entry narratives. Many senior officers entered with aspirational organizational identification. While we are seeing more of Generation Z officers enter with critical identification, viewing law enforcement as a profession requiring reform and wanting to negotiate norms and expectations. Neither perspective is inherently superior, but their collision during socialization may create friction that complicates the trust-building essential for effective mentorship relationships.

Additionally, the retention crisis has altered the structural conditions governing these dynamics. In previous eras of labor surplus, organizations maintained stronger enforcement mechanisms. As Julio (Millennial) recalled, "10 years ago, when I applied, I can remember,

there'd be hundreds of people applying for a handful of spots... and if you didn't get it, then maybe you'd be in the running for the next Academy, and it'd be the same thing, very competitive." Under those conditions, newcomers who strongly resisted socialization expectations often left or were removed, ensuring greater cultural continuity across generations. Current labor scarcity fundamentally changes this calculus. As Luca (Gen Z) observed, "we have a smaller pool to choose from...we have to fill our positions. We're always short-staffed." When the organization cannot afford to lose officers, it faces pressure to accommodate candidates throughout the training pipeline. This pressure has manifested in organizational adaptations. Historically, candidates entering law enforcement were expected to arrive with some degree of self-preparation, having sought out information about the profession, developed physical fitness, and familiarized themselves with organizational expectations on their own initiative. However, the department found that contemporary candidates were not preparing themselves in this way.

In response, the department recently implemented the "pre-pre academy" and "pre-academy" programs designed to prepare candidates before formal academy training begins. The organization established formal preparatory socialization, creating structured pre-academy programs specifically targeted at acclimating newcomers to organizational norms and job expectations before they enter formal training. This represents a shift from selection (choosing only those who arrive fully prepared through self-socialization) to development (investing organizational resources to prepare candidates who show potential but lack traditional preparation).

However, some senior officers interpreted these programs as evidence of declining standards. Multiple senior officers characterized the additional preparation as "hand-holding"

and cited it as proof that the "younger generation was softer than in the past" and required accommodations their cohorts never received. This interpretive divide reveals fundamentally different organizational philosophies: senior officers view the programs as lowering the bar, while Human Resources and Executive Staff viewed them as removing unnecessary barriers that screened out recruits who could become competent officers with appropriate support. This tension extends beyond preparatory programs to the broader question of what constitutes legitimate accommodation versus compromised standards. The organization faces competing pressures: adapt practices and training approaches to retain Generation Z officers, or maintain traditional standards that senior officers believe ensure competence and cohesion. Neither position is obviously correct, both reflect reasonable concerns about different organizational priorities (filling positions vs. maintaining standards, retention vs. reliability).

This dynamic creates an unresolved organizational tension relevant to RQ2's focus on how intergenerational workplace interactions shape socialization and retention. Some Generation Z officers receive less traditional informal socialization, both because senior officers withdraw mentorship and because Generation Z limits participation in informal socialization spaces. This reduction in interactions simultaneously creates risks (loss of essential tacit knowledge, weakened crew cohesion) and possibilities (reduced pressure to adopt problematic practices, space for cultural evolution). Whether this limited socialization ultimately benefits or harms organizational effectiveness and retention remains unclear. The organization loses some mechanisms that built strong culture and reliable coordination, yet those same mechanisms contributed to burnout patterns and public legitimacy challenges.

***Job as employment, not identity***

A central tension shaping intergenerational workplace interactions involves fundamentally different conceptualizations of what it means to be a law enforcement officer, a distinction participants explicitly articulated through contrasting self-descriptions. Senior officers predominantly described themselves using identity statements ("I am a cop"), while Generation Z officers increasingly used employment statements ("I work in law enforcement"). This distinction, while seemingly subtle, signals fundamentally different relationships to the occupation.

Senior officers consistently described entering law enforcement with what they characterized as a "calling" mentality, articulating their relationship to the work through identity rather than employment language. Aaron (Millennial) captured the identity framing: "when I got hired in my group, it was like, 'We want to be cops. That is my calling and I'm going to do everything I can within that career to squeeze every bit of fun and excitement.' I believe in it." The statement "we want to *be* cops", not "work *as*" cops positions policing as a state of being rather than an activity performed. Collen (Gen X) similarly stated, "I'm built to do this job," while Eric (Gen X) characterized policing as "what I'm meant to do."

This language of calling, destiny, and essential identity reflects what organizational identification research describes as complete self-categorization with the organization, where the professional role becomes inseparable from personal identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Patrick (Millennial) observed this pattern in his predecessors, noting they "grew up since they were a little kid, wanting to be a cop... wear the sheep dog shirt, the thin blue line sticker and this is all they ever wanted to be." The continuous identity performance, such as wearing symbolic clothing, displaying organizational affiliation even off-duty demonstrates how thoroughly the occupational identity pervaded all life domains.

However, participants across generations acknowledged severe psychological costs associated with total occupational identification, costs that extended beyond individual officers to damage their families and relationships. Multiple officers described colleagues whose identity integration created debilitating patterns. Patrick (Millennial) recounted an officer "on their SWAT team, and he was so afraid that something might happen when he was off that he didn't leave the county for like, six years. His identity was so tied to his job, and his job stressed him out so much that he couldn't leave." The inability to psychologically disengage, to ever truly be "off duty", created constant stress with no recovery periods. Diego (Gen X) noted the prevalence of this pattern: "there's a statistic that says you're 50% likely to get divorced. I think the job had something to do with that." When officers' identities center entirely on policing and the demands for constant availability, the psychological distance created by trauma exposure combined with emotional suppression norms, and the prioritization of groups bonds may have contributed to relationship issues.

Brock (Millennial) positioned himself explicitly between generations on this dimension, observing the costs in his predecessors while attempting to avoid repeating their patterns: "I'm right in the middle. I think the older generation, they're just so dedicated to their work that everybody gets divorced, and it just looks like they're miserable at the end and they're all stressed out." Brock's characterization, "everybody gets divorced", indicates the pattern was sufficiently common to be expected rather than exceptional, which is what I found throughout my interviews as well. Isaac (Millennial) confirmed this, describing senior officers as being "on their third marriage," highlighting how the cycle repeated across multiple relationships.

This pattern also connected to more severe outcomes. Wilson (Millennial) disclosed his own struggles: "The stuff I've seen, just regular calls, what people can do to each other, family could do to each other, what people can do to children, and elderly. I'm super scared, scared for people, pondered suicide a lot.", while Nick (Gen X) brought up in his interview, "I just don't want to live. I'd be okay with not waking up because I'm so aware, you know, I know what's out there", while Connor (Gen X) confirmed, "I had one of my staff members attempt suicide." These disclosures reveal how the emotional labor and trauma exposure inherent in policing, combined with professional norms discouraging help-seeking and total occupational identification that left officers with no psychological refuge outside work, created psychological crises. Officers also repeatedly referenced concerning patterns regarding post-retirement longevity. Isaac (Millennial) described the trajectory: "The older guys... His generation was the generation where a lot of guys retired, and then they died. And they died because of heart attacks because they were hard drinkers and smokers. They're on their third marriage. They're in terrible shape." This description connects multiple deterioration patterns, physical health decline, substance abuse, relationship failures, all stemming from decades in connection to total occupational commitment that subordinated self-care, family relationships, and wellness to job demands.

Brock (Millennial) articulated what multiple participants mentioned: "You hear these stories of the people who work so long that they only live a couple of years after retirement." Thomas (Gen X) explicitly connected this to identity, advising younger officers: "Don't let law enforcement become your whole life. Maintain a life outside of law enforcement, because those who don't, once they retire since their whole identity is as a cop tend to not live as long in retirement, because it's like they have nothing to live for anymore." This pattern

suggests that while total occupational identification may serve organizational reliability during officers' careers, it produces severe individual costs both during service (burnout, suicide ideation, relationship dissolution, substance abuse) and after (shortened lifespan, loss of purpose). These costs create a fundamental tension: the very identity integration that makes officers most committed may also make them most vulnerable to psychological harm.

In direct contrast to the identity framing ("I am a cop"), Generation Z officers and younger Millennials increasingly employed employment framing ("I work in law enforcement" or "my job is law enforcement"). This linguistic shift represents a fundamental reconceptualization of the relationship between self and occupation. The clearest articulation of this shift came from Henry (Generation X), who explicitly rejected identity formulations:

"I hear a lot of complaining that the people in my group bitch about the young kids because the young kids don't work any overtime. But I love it because I think your whole life should not be a cop. You should be 'My name is Henry. My job is law enforcement', not 'I am a cop'. So these kids are doing the work-life balance... which then causes some of the older cops to bitch about the young kids not wanting to do their job."

Henry's careful language choice is analytically significant. By stating "my job is law enforcement" rather than "I am a cop," he positions policing as something he *does* rather than something he *is*. This framing creates psychological space between the person and the occupation, allowing for an identity that exists independently of the work role. Garcia (Gen Z) demonstrated this same distinction from the opposite generational perspective, characterizing the identity integration approach as problematic: "I feel like a lot of deputies are just deputies, and they have a really hard time being something other than that. It's like

their identity." Garcia's observation, "they have a really hard time being something other than that", suggests viewing total identity integration not as superior commitment but as a limitation that prevents officers from maintaining multifaceted identities.

William (Millennial) explicitly connected this linguistic and conceptual shift to psychological wellness: "Mentally, I think it is easier for the younger generation to realize this doesn't have to be an identity. They can be a cop and still be a person that goes and does fun things. They don't have to be switched on 24/7. For some of us, that's just a character. I think they don't seem to really carry it as their personality as much. *It's a job.*" William's formulation, positioning "cop" as a character one performs rather than one's essential personality, captures how employment framing enables psychological distance.

This shift manifested in explicit intentions to limit career duration based on witnessing predecessors' deterioration. Ian (Gen Z) stated: "I just don't see myself doing it past the age of 35 to tell you the truth. It kind of scares me, seeing the older people, the people that been there, 25/30 years. I see the way they are, their lifestyle... I know the life expectancy after law enforcement, usually around five to 10 years." Ian's statement reveals Generation Z officers holding an awareness of the psychological and physical costs their predecessors experienced, using that awareness to proactively plan career exits before experiencing similar harm. Notably, Ian doesn't frame leaving as career failure but as a logical self-preservation, treating policing as employment allows contemplating leaving when costs exceed benefits. This aligns with trends we are seeing in Generation Z's framing of work (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021).

Significantly, the organization has begun formally reinforcing the employment framing through institutional socialization, a dramatic departure from traditional police

academy practices. Henry (Gen X) noted this explicit curricular change: " 'My job is law enforcement, not I am a cop'...they started teaching work-life balance in the police academy a few years ago, and the young kids have listened." By formally incorporating work-life balance into academy training, the organization signals that employment framing is not deviant but organizationally sanctioned, altering what newcomers learn about appropriate officer identity.

The organization has also implemented structural supports reinforcing this shift. Multiple officers referenced newly established peer support programs and mental health resources that encourage officers to acknowledge psychological struggles and seek help. Zane (Millennial) described the transformation: "from the peer support aspect, that was frowned upon for years. You didn't talk about your problems. Now, the culture has really gotten a lot better about talking to your people, talking to your friends." Brock (Millennial) confirmed institutional changes: "it's changing as far as we have a peer support team now... I think people are more willing to seek out those things that are offered in my generation and below." By institutionalizing wellness resources and explicitly teaching that officers' identities can and should exist in addition to their occupational roles, the organization signals that the employment framing constitutes professional acceptance. Collen (Gen X) explicitly connected these changes to retention imperatives: "I think a lot of it has to do with understanding the needs of who we're hiring now and what they want... So I think it's just understanding what the majority wants to do in their career."

Despite organizational endorsement, the shift toward employment framing has generated significant intergenerational tension. Even within the senior cohort, perspectives diverged. While some like Henry (Gen X) and Thomas (Gen X) actively counseled younger

officers to maintain work-life boundaries, others interpreted employment framing as insufficient dedication and commitment to the profession. When younger officers decline overtime opportunities, senior officers may interpret this through the lens of the Old Culture, reading it as inadequate dedication rather than boundary-setting. Saul (Gen Z) confirmed: "The younger generation is more likely to want to have certain days off, or more time at home, or not work as much overtime... Having more of a work-life balance, I think that's more important for the younger generation than it is for the older generation." Patrick (Millennial) observed how identity models differ across generations: "it's become more of their identity, versus where the younger guys, they're not trying to make their job their identity, they want a life and identity outside of work." These observations were sometimes delivered neutrally, and sometimes with implicit critique regarding insufficient commitment. The retention crisis has shifted these dynamics since the organization cannot afford to lose officers who view it merely as a job (employment framing), even if some senior officers regard this as problematic.

The most serious concern voiced by senior officers was whether employment-framed officers could be trusted during critical incidents. Senior officers' anxiety is not merely cultural conservatism but reflects legitimate questions about whether employment framing can sustain the interdependence required for reliable performance in dangerous situations. If an officer regards law enforcement as "just a job," will they take the same risks to assist partners in life-threatening situations as officers for whom being a cop is their core identity?

Employment framing has also facilitated what might be called role diversification, Generation Z officers articulating their work through multiple professional identities rather than the singular cop identity. Hector (Gen Z) explained: "you have to be a lawyer, judge,

therapist, a lot of things in less than 20 minutes... we wear a lot of different hats, and that's one example, and I prefer to use that law enforcement is lot of different hats." Edgar (Gen Z) noted: "I honestly thought we were just going to deal with law enforcement and criminal activity, but there are just so many more things we do. In a way, we're partially like social workers, but we're law enforcement." Meanwhile, Patrick (Millennial) observed this pattern: "I think the younger generation has more of that, like they're trying to solve the problem or trying to help people more, versus trying to just be a law enforcement officer... They're more willing to engage and try to help find solutions to problems that the solution isn't arresting somebody."

This diversification appears protective, when public discourse attacked "cops," some officers could identify primarily as helpers, problem-solvers, or community servants rather than solely as law enforcement officers. Zane (Millennial) described finding meaning in this approach: "A lot of stuff we show up to, arresting somebody is not going to solve the problem, [that is] a law enforcement solution, but if you can help them navigate what their issue is, or point them in the right direction. That's probably the most rewarding thing." This role diversification potentially serves protective functions. When public perception of "cops" becomes negative, officers who identify primarily as helpers or problem-solvers may psychologically separate their self-worth from attacks on police legitimacy. Brad (Gen Z) demonstrated this thinking when critiquing senior officers' approaches: "Some of them still have the 'I'm a cop so you listen to me' mentality. I don't like that. I think that creates a divide between the public and us." While Hector (Gen Z) highlighted how he saw the shift in interacting with the public, "Back then, policing was more like, 'Oh, kind of courageous. Go

get it'. Now it's more communication with the community. Let them know exactly, be transparent with them, and overall, just be more positive looking towards people."

### ***Generational Psychological Contracts***

The cultural transformation described previously signals a renegotiation of the psychological contract between officers and their agencies. Wilson (Millennial) captured the traditional mindset: "I will say, my generation, we had loyalty and all that kind of conveyed to us and just different principles. We understood there are unwritten rules. We understood what unwritten rules are." His reference to "unwritten rules" points to the psychological contracts of officers within the organization (Rousseau, 1995). Organizations, represented through leadership and veteran officers also maintain expectations about employee contributions and organizational inducements. The generational tensions observed reflect different officer expectations, and misalignments between what organizations (shaped by previous generations' contracts) expect to give and receive versus what newer officers expect. Within this study, the data revealed three distinct tiers of psychological contracts aligned with generational cohorts, representing different understandings of the employment relationship. This alignment between psychological contracts and generational cohorts reflects how formative experiences shape enduring workplace expectations (Mannheim, 1952; Ryder, 1965). As well as how each generation has learned to understand what their work is all about and what their careers mean from the previous generation in the workplace. From this perspective, the characteristics of each generational cohorts' contracts include aspects of the previous generations' values and perspectives, which had an influence on them.

#### **Gen X: Absolute Loyalty**

Gen X officers viewed employment as a lifetime commitment to a single agency. Diego (Gen X) explained: "For older officers, I think that's the same mindset, they retire or their body won't let them do this job anymore...[we are] more stubborn like, 'I got hired here, so I'm staying.' Or that loyalty aspect as well." While Ken (Gen X) notes, "I've been here for 22 years as opposed to going from one agency to another." This reflects a relational psychological contract where officers gave total identity commitment ("I am a cop"), few work-life boundaries, strong agency loyalty, and deferred gratification. In exchange, they expected identity within the "police family," job security, community respect, and organizational support. This group particularly characterized by Generation X who entered when agencies could be highly selective, and aligns with what Lub et al. (2016) found among older generations: strong organizational commitment and viewing employment as long-term relational exchange. Generation X entered law enforcement when agencies maintained substantial applicant pools and operated under broader community support, especially following 9/11. Collen (Gen X), notes, "every single person I went to the academy with...had the intention of retiring with that agency. We all were like, 'Yeah, this is the job I want, because this is where I'm going to retire'." This universal expectation reflected the relational contract dominating that era. This is also how Gen X was trained by the previous generation (Baby Boomers) who held similar views and values (Lub et al., 2016) and highlights how they have been socialized to approach their work as long term and developing loyalty to the organization over time, and less likely to think of their career as transportable.

### **Millennials: Transactional Obligation**

Officers from this generation operated under a transactional obligation mindset: "I owe the agency X years or milestones, and once fulfilled, I'm free to leave guilt-free." Wilson

(Millennial) exemplified this: "I waited patiently nine years...I tried 12 times...That was normal. So I think that's a big difference, the older generation is okay with waiting and understood, where I think the current generation is, 'I don't get what I want, I'm gonna go find what I want'." After achieving his specialty unit goals, his perspective shifted: "I'm satisfied having been in [specialty unit] for the last two years...I'm all about chilling now...like I'm okay to quit." Aaron (Millennial) articulated similar time-bound thinking: "I think about retiring [at] 15 or 20 years and then starting my second job, my second aspiration is to be a lawyer", this quote highlights how for Aaron law enforcement is understood as a defined chapter rather than lifelong commitment. Millennials in this perspective were socialized into remnants of traditional culture, but formative experiences, such as witnessing eroded job security, entering the workforce in 2008 with many having college debt, made them skeptical of unconditional loyalty (Pichler et al., 2021).

This created a unique bridge position: they held values diverging from Generation X's absolute loyalty yet felt compelled to comply with Old Culture standards to avoid career consequences. Isaac (Millennial) described the pressure to conform despite personal reservations: "He basically told me, 'Hey, man, if you create a jacket within your culture, you can get rid of it, but it's going to take a long time. They're going to want to see you prove to them that you've changed.'" Isaac's account reveals the high stakes of deviating from cultural expectations for this generation, where even minor departures from norms may create lasting reputational damage. However, this very experience positioned Millennials as organizational intermediaries capable of translating between generational worldviews. Aaron (Millennial) articulated this bridging function: "I think there's been a good kind of bridge gap to people in my kind of area of experience, where you do identify with both groups and can kind of

bridge the gap a little bit, talk to the younger deputies about maybe what their priorities are." Having navigated the tension between personal values and organizational conformity themselves, Millennials can explain Generation Z's transactional expectations to older officers while helping newer officers understand residual loyalty expectations they will encounter.

### **Generation Z: Free Agency**

Generation Z maintained less perceived loyalty to their current agency, viewing employment as contingent on continued satisfaction. Quentin (Gen Z) explained: "Those guys looked, you know, they looked very tired. And I don't want to be that person. I'm not the type of person who likes staying somewhere." When these conditions no longer met their expectations Gen Z officers are more prepared to leave for another agency or entirely different profession without viewing this decision as violating any obligation.

Meanwhile older officers perceived this approach as breaking the employment contract. Collen (Gen X) described Generation Z's approach bluntly: "These kids have no loyalty to this agency like our generation...They don't live to work, and that has caused a total lack of loyalty, this is just where they work, It's not their family." This represents what Rousseau (1995) termed more of a transactional psychological contract, which consists of a narrower scope, focused on economic exchange, with explicit time frames and clear boundaries between work and non-work domains. However, this shift creates organizational disruption when officers leave shortly after completing training. William (Millennial) articulated his perspective when talking about the newest generation: "So when someone makes it through the academy and then a month out on a patrol, they go, 'This isn't for me.' We're like...at what point did you decide that this wasn't the deal after you invested a year of

your life into all this stuff?" William's question reflects a misunderstanding of psychological contract dynamics: these officers didn't change their minds about "the deal", rather Generation Z entered with a different understanding of what the deal entailed. Historically, the organization's investment of hundreds of thousands of dollars in training created a sense of obligation where officers felt they "owed" the agency enough tenure to justify that investment, in addition to being one of the few selected out of hundreds of applicants. This mutual understanding worked when both parties operated under the same framework. However, Generation Z's transactional contract operates on different reciprocity principles.

Kaleb (Gen Z) captured this sentiment, "If you don't feel like your company needs or values you, you're not going to really need or value them either." While Edgar (Gen Z) stated: "Some people may give more time to the job, which is perfectly fine, but for me I feel like my family is more important than my career." Additionally, Generation Z has learned workplace norms from Millennials who already began questioning unconditional organizational commitment. Officers operating under different contracts may struggle to understand each other's motivations. From the Gen X perspective, Gen Z appears as disloyal; from the Gen Z perspective, Gen X appears as irrational devotion at unreasonable personal cost. (See Figure 2 for additional information).

### **Interpretations**

The findings presented above document empirical patterns in how law enforcement organizational culture is evolving and how intergenerational dynamics shape Generation Z officers' socialization and retention. This section interprets those patterns through the theoretical frameworks established in the literature review, connecting what participants described to the scholarly conversations their experiences inform. The interpretations are

organized around the two research questions before addressing cross-cutting dynamics and the central paradox emerging from the data.

### ***Cultural Transformation (RQ1)***

#### **Old Culture and The HRO System**

The six cultural practices documented in the findings; hazing as gatekeeping, deference to authority, alcohol-centered bonding, emotional suppression, and their transformation through drivers of change and the 2020 convergence were not independent traditions that happened to coexist. Through the lens of HRO theory, they constituted a mutually reinforcing socialization system designed to produce the reliability that high-stakes work demands.

The hazing practices participants described mirror what Myers (2005a) documented in her study of firefighter assimilation, where probationary firefighters called "booters" were similarly expected to perform extensive humble servitude before gaining acceptance. Myers found that booters took on additional menial tasks and were explicitly told to be "seen and not heard" as they built reputations as hard workers. Like the law enforcement officers in the current study, firefighter booters understood that acceptance came only after demonstrating unwavering commitment through subordinate behavior. Successful navigation of these rituals facilitated social integration through reciprocal acceptance. As Myers (2005a) demonstrates, initiation processes enable newcomers and incumbent members to "exchange information and communicate acceptance to one another" (p. 367), transforming outsiders into insiders. This process cultivated the intense cohesion characteristic of strong organizational cultures (Schein, 2004; Weick, 1987). Myers and McPhee (2006) emphasized that trust formation is particularly critical in HROs where coordination failures can prove catastrophic, suggesting

that traditional hazing functioned as an intensive trust-testing mechanism. The filtering logic participants described, such as weeding out those who would not persist reflects HRO principles emphasizing preoccupation with failure (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). The organization prioritized preventing uncommitted members from accessing operational roles where their failures could cascade into catastrophic outcomes.

The culture of deference operated in concert with hazing. By systematically eliminating the newcomer's voice, the organization foreclosed possibilities for role negotiation, a process Myers and Oetzel (2003) identified as a key dimension of assimilation in most organizations but notably absent in HRO contexts (Myers, 2005a). This elimination of role negotiation aligned with established HRO operational logic. In law enforcement contexts where coordination failures can result in officer deaths, civilian casualties, or compromised public safety, individual role negotiation threatens the predictability required for collective action under pressure (Ault & Brandley, 2023; King, 2009). Deference to authority thus served not merely to establish hierarchy but to ensure operational reliability when lives hang in the balance. By silencing newcomers and eliminating questioning, the organization created the predictability essential for coordinated emergency response (Weick et al., 1999). However, while the Old Culture's emphasis on unquestioned obedience reflected HRO imperatives for reliability, this approach carried organizational costs, including mental fatigue, emotional detachment, and burnout that may have affected retention (Ault & Brandley, 2023).

The shift toward explanation-seeking documented in the findings fundamentally challenges traditional HRO logic. Conventional HRO scholarship emphasizes that HROs

achieve operational excellence through standardized socialization tactics that minimize individual variation and prioritize conformity to established procedures (Jones, 1986; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). Newcomers are expected to adopt predetermined role definitions rather than negotiate them, with deference to expertise serving as a core reliability principle (Myers & McPhee, 2006; Weick et al., 1999). Frank's approach of positioning trainees as knowledge sources rather than passive recipients signals a reimagining of how reliability can be achieved. This shift contradicts previous theorizing and practice. Traditional HRO theory suggests that reducing deference to expertise threatens the uniformity essential for coordinated emergency response (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001), while critical HRO scholarship argues that rigid hierarchy itself creates safety vulnerabilities by blocking crucial information from flowing upward (Barton & Sutcliffe, 2009; Fox & Jahn, 2014). The department's willingness to privilege newcomer knowledge suggests that organizational learning and adaptation may now be more critical to reliability than strict conformity to established norms.

Alcohol-centered bonding served essential functions within this system. In high-reliability contexts where members depend on one another for survival, informal gatherings helped build the trust, team cohesion, and shared understanding necessary for coordinated action under life-threatening conditions (Baker et al., 2006; Hinderaker, 2014). Research on first responders confirms that informal peer interactions serve as the primary mechanism through which members develop the implicit trust and shared understanding required for coordinating action under life-threatening conditions (Craw & Miller-Day, 2023). The senior officers' concerns about declining informal socialization documented in the findings are not entirely unfounded. Research demonstrates that strong coworker relationships significantly predict lower turnover intentions in law enforcement, making peer support a critical retention

factor (Brough & Frame, 2004; Land, 2021). In HRO contexts specifically, informal after-hours socializing serves essential functions beyond simple camaraderie: these interactions build the trust, shared mental models, and team cohesion necessary for coordinated action when lives depend on split-second decision-making (Baker et al., 2006; Myers & McPhee, 2006). Such trust and coordination capabilities cannot be developed through formal training alone but require repeated social interactions where members demonstrate reliability and shared values (Desmond, 2006; Jahn, 2016). Additionally, informal gatherings facilitate tacit knowledge transfer, the transmission of unwritten rules, situational judgment, and occupational wisdom through storytelling and shared experience that proves essential for operational competence but cannot be codified in training manuals (Myers, 2010; Swap et al., 2001). In law enforcement, informal socializing also facilitates the identity formation and organizational assimilation necessary for newcomers to become trusted, functional crew members (Gailliard et al., 2010; Hinderaker, 2014).

However, maintaining relationships and interests outside law enforcement provides officers with diverse social support networks and alternative identity anchors. When organizational identity becomes too central, officers face increased vulnerability to burnout, becoming "100% cop all the time" with no psychological distance from traumatic work experiences (Hilal & Litsey, 2019). The challenge, then, is not whether bonding mechanisms are necessary, the HRO literature confirms they are essential (Baker et al., 2006; Myers & McPhee, 2006). The question is whether these bonding functions can be preserved through mechanisms other than alcohol-centered informal socializing, and whether work relationships cultivated only while on shift can be strong enough when fewer officers want to socialize outside of work. The retention crisis has made this question more urgent, the organization

can no longer afford practices that younger generations reject or that contribute to the burnout driving officer turnover (Craw & Miller-Day, 2023; Eikenberry et al., 2023). Whether agencies can develop alternative bonding mechanisms remains an open question with direct implications for both operational safety and retention, as this shift is still so new that the long-term organizational consequences are not yet fully visible.

The emotional suppression norms documented in the findings similarly served dual functions within this integrated system. Informal gatherings created spaces where officers could discuss experiences that only colleagues can fully understand, developing shared frameworks for managing the psychological toll of their work (Craw & Miller-Day, 2023; Eikenberry et al., 2023). Generation Z's approach to work-life separation introduces different protective mechanisms. Work-life balance, specifically the capacity to establish clear boundaries between professional and personal domains has been shown to have associations with reduced burnout, lower emotional exhaustion, and improved psychological well-being among police officers (McDowall & Lindsay, 2013; Sen & Hooja, 2015). Officers who actively maintain boundaries between work and personal life show enhanced capacity for managing the emotional labor inherent in policing while experiencing less depersonalization and emotional exhaustion, factors that research links to career exits (McDowall & Lindsay, 2013; Schaible & Gecas, 2010).

Understanding these practices as an integrated system, not isolated traditions is essential for interpreting why their decline generates such anxiety among senior officers. Hazing tested commitment, deference ensured coordination, alcohol bonding built trust and transferred tacit knowledge, and emotional suppression maintained operational composure.

These elements combined to create what scholars call "strong culture": high consistency, shared values, and unified identity that enhance coordination (Gochhayat et al., 2017). In HRO contexts, such shared mental models have been theorized as essential for collective mindfulness and error prevention (Weick & Roberts, 1993; Vaz et al., 2023). When one element of this system declines, when officers stop socializing after hours, or newcomers begin questioning directives the effects cascade through the entire system. This explains why senior officers' concerns are not merely nostalgic resistance to change but reflect legitimate anxiety about the mechanisms that historically produced reliability in dangerous work.

### **The 2020 Convergence and Generation Z's Entry Experience**

The findings documented how the convergence of George Floyd's murder, COVID-19, and the Defund the Police movement reshaped the conditions under which Generation Z entered law enforcement. The broader theoretical significance of this convergence as a mechanism of HRO cultural change is addressed in the Discussion. Here, the focus is on what this convergence meant for the socialization experiences Generation Z actually encountered.

Myers et al. (2024) found that newcomers entering during crisis periods develop fundamentally different relationship patterns with their organizations compared to those entering during stable periods, differences that persist over time. Where previous cohorts encountered functioning socialization systems designed to reproduce existing cultural norms through what Van Maanen and Schein (1979) termed "institutionalized tactics," Generation Z entered during what scholars call "organizational imprinting," when disrupted socialization creates lasting impressions that shape how cohorts understand appropriate organizational

behavior (Myers et al., 2024). Hazing rituals had functioned as gatekeeping mechanisms testing newcomer resilience and creating cohort bonding through shared ordeal, a pattern observed across HRO professions (Allen, 2006). These practices persisted for decades precisely because stable conditions allowed their continuous reproduction. The 2020 convergence disrupted this reproduction.

The public reckoning prompted organizational reflection on how internal practices might have contributed to policing crises. Critically, this period of institutional scrutiny may have created space for previously muted voices within the organization to surface. Officers from earlier generations who may have harbored concerns about traditional practices, such as the excessive drinking culture, or the hazing rituals, but felt unable to voice dissent may have found that the crisis legitimized what had previously been unspeakable critiques of organizational norms.

Generation Z thus entered an organization experiencing what Weick (1995) terms "sensemaking under crisis", not merely encountering a stable culture they could accept or reject, but arriving during active contestation over which practices were legitimate. Because Generation Z missed the some of the same divestiture socialization that would have taught them traditional cultural practices, and entered when the organization itself was questioning those practices. What distinguishes Generation Z is that the timing of their entry, during a period of institutional disruption and intergenerational reflection, allowed them to maintain more of their cohort values in the workplace. This positions Generation Z as both beneficiaries and accelerators of change.

Research demonstrates that disrupted socialization during entry has lasting effects that persist even after conditions normalize (Myers et al., 2024), suggesting that Generation Z officers who missed divestiture socialization mechanisms may never fully acquire the cultural knowledge that was transmitted through observation and informal interaction during previous generations' entry experiences. Generation Z officers experienced limited intergenerational interactions during their critical entry phase, precisely when newcomers typically acquire organizational culture through observation, informal mentorship, and daily interactions with veterans (Louis, 1980; Van Maanen, 1973). Disruptions during this "sensitive period" produce lasting effects on organizational relationships, cultural understanding, and expectations (Myers et al., 2024). Rather than receiving consistent cultural messages through intensive informal socialization, Generation Z encountered veterans expressing divergent views, some defending traditional practices while others openly critiqued them. This disrupted entry process relates to RQ2's focus on how intergenerational workplace interactions shape Generation Z's socialization experiences: because many Generation Z officers missed the informal socialization mechanisms that had transmitted cultural knowledge for decades, they entered lacking shared reference points with senior colleagues.

### ***Socialization and Retention Dynamics (RQ2)***

#### **Disrupted Socialization and Its Dual Consequences**

The mentorship dynamics documented in the findings represent a significant departure from divestiture socialization models where experienced officers actively guided newcomers through the profession's demands. The combination of senior officers withdrawing some mentorship and Generation Z officers limiting participation in traditional

socialization spaces produces organizational consequences that cut in two directions. On one hand, reduced socialization threatens the transmission of essential tacit knowledge. HRO theory emphasizes that newcomers must acquire deeply embedded operational knowledge to ensure reliability during critical incidents (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). When intergenerational knowledge transfer mechanisms break down, organizations risk losing institutional memory and operational wisdom that cannot be codified in formal training. On the other hand, limited exposure to traditional norms creates space for behavioral divergence from practices that face increasing scrutiny. When Generation Z officers have less contact with veterans enforcing Old Culture expectations, they may be less pressured to adopt those patterns. However, this same distance may also prevent them from acquiring the strong crew cohesion and mutual trust that research identifies as essential for coordinated action under dangerous conditions (Baker et al., 2006; Myers & McPhee, 2006).

The organizational adaptation documented in the findings, the creation of pre-academy programs, represents a significant departure from traditional HRO socialization. Myers (2005a) found that in HROs, unlike newcomers to most non-HROs, newcomers were required to socialize themselves prior to entry, therefore candidates independently sought information and prepared themselves for organizational demands before arriving. However, in the current study, the department found that contemporary candidates were not informally socializing themselves prior to entry, necessitating formal preparatory socialization. This shift from selection to development inverts the traditional HRO model and carries consequences for how newcomers understand their relationship to the organization from the outset.

These mentorship dynamics and disrupted socialization mechanisms have broader interpretive significance. Generation Z entered during crisis when traditional assimilation processes were disrupted, but this coincided with broader societal shifts in how this generation defines meaningful work, prioritizing positive societal impact, work-life balance, and value congruence with employers (Myers & Cavaness, 2024; Parker & Igielnik, 2020). When organizations' values diverge from these expectations, turnover becomes more likely. The absence of consistent mentorship, combined with limited participation in informal socialization spaces, means Generation Z officers develop weaker affective commitment to the organization compared to previous cohorts who experienced more intensive cultural transmission. When officers lack strong organizational identification built through sustained intergenerational relationships, they may view their employment more transactionally, as a job rather than a calling, making departure decisions easier when external opportunities arise or organizational challenges intensify.

### **Identity Reconceptualization in an HRO Context**

The "I am a cop" to "I work in law enforcement" shift documented in the findings represents what role theorists describe as the difference between complete incorporation of role into self-concept versus occupying a position while maintaining self-concept boundaries (Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Burke, 2000). These competing models carry implications for officer wellbeing, organizational commitment, and retention outcomes.

The complete identity integration that senior officers described historically characterized HROs and strong cultures, where such integration was understood as both demonstrating dedication and enabling the cohesion necessary for coordinated action under

dangerous conditions (Weick, 1987). The identity narratives senior officers used, such as seeing law enforcement as "calling," draw on culturally available identity scripts positioning law enforcement as vocation rather than employment (Evans & Mains, 1995; Giddens, 1991). Such narratives provide coherence and meaning but also bind individuals to self-definitions that become difficult to revise or exit (Ricoeur, 1981). For HROs, such total identification served functional purposes. When officers view policing as their core identity, they demonstrate willingness to prioritize organizational needs over personal preferences, working extensive overtime, remaining psychologically engaged during off-duty hours, and maintaining constant readiness to respond. This availability and dedication theoretically enhanced organizational reliability by ensuring sufficient staffing and unwavering commitment during critical incidents (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001).

Generation Z's employment framing reflects not organizational socialization alone but anticipatory knowledge drawn from broader societal expectations about work-life integration (Jablin, 2001; Scott & Myers, 2010). Gibson and Papa (2000) demonstrate that newcomers inevitably rely on anticipatory knowledge from participation in family, educational, and consumer contexts. Generation Z officers brought employment framing expectations with them, which the organization then formally legitimized through academy curriculum, a reversal of divestiture socialization where organizations historically attempted to reshape newcomer expectations. This marks a departure from divestiture socialization, which sought to restructure recruits' identities through stress, deprivation, and intensive indoctrination designed to break down civilian identities and rebuild cop identities. The explicit teaching of work-life balance represents an institutional acknowledgment that identity integration may be unsustainable. By formally teaching that maintaining boundaries between work and personal

life constitutes appropriate professional behavior, the academy legitimizes the employment framing. This creates alignment between organizational messaging and generational values, potentially facilitating what Edwards and Cable (2009) term value congruence, the compatibility between individual and organizational values that correlates with retention.

The organizational changes documented in the findings, such as wellness programs, peer support, academy curriculum changes represent more than administrative mechanisms. Formal organizational structures, including policies, training programs, and wellness initiatives, serve as symbols of organizational values about what behaviors are encouraged (McPhee, 1985; Scott & Myers, 2010). The formalization of wellness programs and peer support systems communicates organizational acceptance of psychological vulnerability and bounded commitment. This represents a fundamental shift in organizational acculturation, the process through which newcomers learn about and accept organizational norms and values (Morrison, 1993). Research on HROs demonstrates that acculturation is the strongest predictor of assimilation outcomes, shaping how members understand their roles and relationships (Myers & McPhee, 2006). By formally incorporating the employment framing into acculturation processes, the organization signals that identity separation is not deviant but professionally appropriate.

However, the intergenerational tensions documented around overtime refusal and perceived dedication reflect deeper structural dynamics. Research on HROs shows that demonstrating involvement through volunteering for extra duties communicates willingness to assist in accomplishing group goals (Moreland & Levine, 2001; Myers & McPhee, 2006). From senior officers' perspective, overtime refusal signals insufficient involvement,

undermining the commitment that research demonstrates predicts both performance and retention (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Identity work occurs within asymmetrical power relations where both parties exercise constrained agency (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Scott & Myers, 2010). While organizations seek to regulate worker identities, individuals retain capacity to resist and appropriate dominant discourses for their own purposes (Webb, 2006). The retention crisis has shifted these power dynamics, providing Generation Z leverage to resist identity integration demands that previous cohorts could not refuse. Labor scarcity has created conditions where the organization cannot afford to lose officers who maintain employment framing, even when some senior officers regard this as problematic.

Senior officers' concerns about whether employment-framed officers can be trusted during critical incidents have empirical grounding. In HRO contexts, trustworthiness is primarily based on members' ability and willingness to prioritize team safety (Mayer & Davis, 1999; Weick & Roberts, 1993). When members perceive uncertainty about colleagues' dedication, the collective mindfulness essential for coordinated action under pressure may be compromised (Hutchins, 1996; Myers & McPhee, 2006). Whether employment framing actually reduces operational reliability or whether in-shift competence can substitute for total identification remains an empirical question the current data cannot definitively resolve.

The role diversification documented in the findings of Generation Z officers articulating their work through multiple professional identities rather than the singular cop identity connects to contemporary identity scholarship that rejects assumptions of unified or singular identities, demonstrating instead that individuals maintain multiple identities that

may be "loosely coupled," "tensional," or even "contradictory" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Beech, 2008; Brown, 2021; Scott et al., 1998). Generation Z officers' articulation of themselves as simultaneously law enforcement, social workers, problem-solvers, and community helpers represents this multiplicity. Rather than indicating confused identity, such diversification may provide flexibility to navigate the often discontinuous and conflicting demands of contemporary policing.

### **Psychological Contract Shifts as Generational Phenomenon**

The three-tier structure documented in the findings of Gen X's absolute loyalty, Millennial transactional obligation, and Generation Z's free agency reflects a broader societal transformation in psychological contract types shifting from relational to transactional, driven by economic restructuring and changing organizational practices (Anderson & Schalk, 1998; Guest, 2004; Rousseau, 1995). While psychological contracts are held by individuals, they reflect beliefs about reciprocal obligations. Organizations, represented through leadership and veteran officers, also maintain expectations about employee contributions and organizational inducements. The generational tensions observed reflect misalignments between what organizations (shaped by previous generations' contracts) expect to give and receive versus what newer officers expect.

Gen X's absolute loyalty contract aligns with what Lub et al. (2016) found among older generations: strong organizational commitment and viewing employment as long-term relational exchange. This cohort entered when agencies could be highly selective and operated under broader community support. The Millennial shift toward transactional obligation represents what De Vos et al. (2003) describe as psychological contract adaptation

during socialization, where once officers fulfill obligations and receive promised inducements, their sense of debt diminishes (Gouldner, 1960). Generation Z's free agency approach aligns with research showing younger generations valuing job content, career development, and work-life balance over social atmosphere and organizational policies (Lub et al., 2016). Generation Z brings different expectations shaped by post-2008 recession environments and social movements emphasizing individual authenticity and mental health over sacrifice and service (Myers & Cavaness, 2024).

### **Role Negotiation in HRO Contexts**

The findings reveal a fundamental tension: role negotiation is occurring in a context where established theory predicted it could not. Introducing role negotiation into HRO settings contradicts established operational logic that has governed law enforcement for decades. Traditional HRO socialization emphasized uniformity and coordination under stress, where newcomers learned through social cues and embodied practice rather than dialogue or negotiation (Myers, 2011). This approach ensured the predictability essential for reliable emergency response, officers could anticipate teammates' actions because everyone had been socialized into standardized behavioral patterns.

The question becomes whether law enforcement can achieve "integrative complexity": systems that combine order and flexibility where members follow rules but also challenge them to improve outcomes (McPhee & Zaug, 2009). Cultural change literature suggests the path forward remains uncertain. Such shifts often fail due to lack of authentic modeling and create competing assumptions and values where different units may understand organizational changes differently (Keyton, 2011). Generation Z officers lack clear

exemplars of how to balance personal boundaries with operational demands. Different squads may develop divergent norms, with some maintaining traditional expectations while others accommodate role negotiation, creating organizational fragmentation that threatens the unified culture historically seen as essential for coordinated emergency response. The theoretical and practical significance of this tension, including the conditions under which role negotiation becomes possible in HRO contexts and its consequences for organizational reliability is addressed in the Discussion.

### **Intergenerational Dynamics**

Based on these data and in response to RQ2, these three intergenerational dynamics; mentorship patterns, identity frameworks, and psychological contracts, operate simultaneously to shape Generation Z officers' socialization experiences and retention. When Generation Z officers do interact with senior colleagues, they encounter divergent perspectives: some veterans actively validate employment framing and boundary-setting, while others interpret these same behaviors as insufficient commitment worthy of withdrawn mentorship. These competing intergenerational messages shape how Generation Z negotiates their organizational roles, with their employment framing ("I work in law enforcement") representing both organizational adaptation to wellness imperatives and generational rejection of the total identification. However, this same employment framing connects to transactional psychological contracts that make departure decisions easier when organizational expectations clash with personal priorities. The retention paradox is thus embedded within intergenerational dynamics: the very boundary-setting that protects Generation Z from burnout may weaken the affective commitment that kept previous generations loyal despite difficulties. What is clear is that intergenerational workplace

interactions serve as the primary site where this cultural transformation is being negotiated, with each interaction representing a micro-level contest over which employment expectations, identity frameworks, and reciprocal obligations define law enforcement work.

### **Paradox**

However, this shift from "I am a cop" to "I work in law enforcement" creates what Putnam et al., (2016) identify as an organizational paradox; contradictions that persist over time where essential but opposing demands continuously coexist, with direct retention implications. As Zane (Millennial) was able to explicitly articulate, "There's two different cultures within the agency. There's my peers and my kind of subset. Then, there's the newer generation that's coming through who are applying their standards, morals and ethics. I don't want to say it clashes, but sometimes there's a disconnect between the two."

Research consistently demonstrates that strong occupational identification predicts organizational commitment and reduces turnover intentions (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). When employees view their work as central to their identity, they demonstrate greater loyalty, willingness to endure difficulties, and resistance to leaving even when attractive alternatives exist. Committed members demonstrate both attitudinal attachment and behaviors manifesting that attachment (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Research on HROs confirms that involvement and commitment predict acceptance, performance, and retention (Myers & McPhee, 2006). By formally teaching that "law enforcement is my job, not who I am," and implementing wellness programs that reinforce identity separation, the organization attempts to address the psychological costs—divorce, substance abuse, suicide ideation, shortened post-retirement lifespan—that drove previous generations toward burnout and negative public image. Reducing these costs theoretically should improve retention by making careers

more sustainable over time. However, simultaneously reducing occupational identification may increase turnover by weakening the psychological bonds keeping officers committed when facing challenges.

This creates competing pressures: maintaining the "I am a cop" framing preserves commitment but risks severe psychological and relational harm, while promoting the "I work in law enforcement" framing improves wellness but may reduce retention. The organization faces a contradiction where solutions to one retention mechanism (preventing burnout) potentially worsen another (maintaining commitment). As Putnam et al. (2016) explain, such paradoxes are characterized by opposing forces where pursuing one pole may increasingly activate tension with the other pole. Both Generation Z officers *and* the organization are changing through these negotiations. Generation Z maintains employment framing while developing law enforcement competencies; the organization implements wellness programs while seeking to maintain operational reliability.

Critically, this paradox manifests what Putnam et al. (2016) term unintended consequences, which are outcomes that actors neither expected nor preferred. Wellness initiatives designed to improve retention by preventing burnout may inadvertently reduce retention by weakening the affective commitment that historically sustained officers through difficulty. This represents organizational change efforts producing results opposite to their original intent.

Brock (Millennial) articulated his personal negotiation of this tension: "I'm in the middle somewhere where I take pride in the career, and I want to do the job well, and I want to do it right, but I also value my family and my time with my family, so I'm not going to completely sacrifice that for the career, but I'm going to balance it the best I can." Brock's

position—moderate identification combined with clear boundaries—may represent a middle path between the identity ("I am") and employment ("I work in") framings, though whether such balanced approaches can be institutionalized or remain individual adaptations remains unclear.

This identity shift relates to RQ2's focus on how intergenerational workplace interactions shape Generation Z's socialization and retention. These competing identity models position intergenerational interactions as critical sites where the future of law enforcement organizational culture and identity is being negotiated. Socialization scholarship emphasizes that membership negotiations are not unidirectional (organization socializing newcomer) but involve ongoing mutual adaptation (Scott & Myers, 2010). When senior officers teach Generation Z about work-life balance, even reluctantly, they may internalize these values themselves, bringing to discursive consciousness issues previously taken for granted (Mead, 1934). Similarly, when Generation Z officers observe the documented costs of total identification in their predecessors' lives, they can construct alternative identity narratives drawing on different cultural resources.

When Generation Z officers encounter senior colleagues who validate the employment framing and explicitly teach that "law enforcement is what you do, not who you are," they receive confirmation that maintaining identity boundaries is professionally acceptable. These validating interactions facilitate value congruence between personal values and organizational culture that may predict retention for this younger generation (Edwards & Cable, 2009). The organization's formal teaching of work-life balance and the employment framing in academy training provides institutional legitimacy for Generation Z's perspective. However, when individual senior officers contradict this institutional message through

informal social interactions—criticizing younger officers for not working overtime, questioning their dedication, or modeling total identity integration—Generation Z officers face competing expectations requiring navigation.

Additionally, Generation Z's role diversification, viewing themselves as problem-solvers and helpers who utilize law enforcement skills, may create negotiating space during difficult periods. When public perception of policing deteriorates, officers who frame their identity exclusively as "I am a cop" experience direct identity threats. Officers who maintain the employment framing and diversified professional identities can potentially preserve self-worth by emphasizing other role components or by recognizing that criticism of policing doesn't constitute criticism of their essential selves.

## **Discussion**

This study examined how law enforcement organizational culture is evolving at least in part in response to the retention crises and what role Generation Z officers play in this transformation (RQ1), and how intergenerational workplace interactions shape Generation Z officers' socialization experiences and retention (RQ2). This discussion presents three theoretical contributions challenging police culture scholarship, extending HRO theory regarding cultural change, and reconsidering role negotiation in dangerous work contexts. Following theoretical contributions, I discuss practical implications for law enforcement leadership and first responder sectors, then conclude with limitations and future research directions.

The first theoretical contribution addresses the disconnect between existing police culture literature and contemporary organizational realities. Traditional police culture scholarship emphasizes paramilitary hierarchy, emotional suppression, hazing practices, and

"us versus them" mentalities as defining features (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010; Ford, 2018; Hall et al., 2016). That scholarship accurately described what participants in the current study termed Old Culture, the traditional framework that dominated law enforcement for decades. However, findings reveal significant cultural transformation that existing literature does not adequately address. The New Culture emerging in this department demonstrates characteristics largely absent from policing scholarship. Participants across all generations explicitly distinguished between Old and New Culture, using this terminology so consistently that it appeared to represent shared organizational vocabulary. This linguistic uniformity itself constitutes evidence of cultural evolution, members collectively recognize they are experiencing transformation rather than gradual drift. Officers described New Culture as emphasizing wellness programs, accessible leadership, work-life boundaries, and employment rather than identity framing. These characteristics stand in sharp contrast to the totalistic occupational cultures documented in previous research.

Critically, officers did not describe these changes as unique to their specific agency. Rather, participants across generations framed cultural transformation as broader shifts affecting law enforcement nationally. As William (Millennial) noted "our issues in the agency now, which are across the board. Any agencies dealing with this, especially with short staffing" while Maria (Gen Z) observed that " I think the culture of law enforcement has changed from what I've been told and what I've learned. I'm not saying just this department specifically but more broadly." This interpretation aligns with evidence that recruitment and retention crises operate at a national scale and that the 2020 crisis events affected departments across the country. Evidence from parallel first responder sectors supports the claim that observed changes extend beyond policing and represent generational

shifts rather than life-stage effects or policing-specific dynamics. If the transformation observed represents genuinely generational shifts in work values, similar patterns should appear in adjacent occupational sectors facing comparable workforce challenges.

Firefighting demonstrates applicant pool collapse mirroring law enforcement. New York City's fire department received 21,760 applicants in 2024, which is less than half the 46,305 who tested in 2017 and substantially below the 42,000+ applicant pool in 2012 (Freeman, 2025; Moss, 2025). The U.S. Forest Service reported over 5,100 unfilled positions in 2025, representing 26% vacancy rates (Moss, 2025). These patterns parallel the law enforcement recruitment crisis documented in this study. Emergency Medical Services experience comparable crises, with turnover rates reaching 20-30% annually and 65% of agencies reporting decreased applications (Luckritz et al., 2023). When EMS practitioners planning to leave were surveyed, work-life balance emerged as the primary motivation cited by 50% of those intending to depart within six years (Luckritz et al., 2023). This mirrors the boundary-setting behaviors Generation Z officers described as central to their career decisions. Meanwhile, military service shows declining interest spanning three decades. Youth expressing they will "definitely" or "probably" serve dropped from 16% in 2003 to 9-10% by 2022-2024 (United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), 2024; Kuzminski & Sylvester, 2025). Additionally, institutional trust in the U.S. military declined from 72% in 2020 to 60% in 2023, reflecting broader generational disengagement from traditional institutions requiring total commitment (Bell et al., 2024). Although some of these trends are a result of larger societal change, some change appears to be as a result of changes in generational values.

The fact that firefighting, EMS, and military recruitment demonstrate similar challenges suggests broader cultural transformation extending beyond any single profession. Society itself has undergone significant transformation with these occurring alongside ongoing challenges including political polarization, climate activism, and questions about institutional legitimacy that have reshaped how the public views and interacts with HROs. Meanwhile, Generation Z officers bring distinctive characteristics to this already-transforming context. As the first true digital natives they developed communication preferences fundamentally different from previous cohorts, demonstrating resistance to email and favoring instant messaging while desiring peer-like relationships with supervisors (Milmo & Packham, 2023; Schroth, 2019; Twenge, 2023). Their upbringings were characterized by protective parenting and digital platforms fostering peer-to-peer rather than intergenerational communication, leaving them with less experience and exposure to the intergenerational interactions they would encounter in organizations (Epstein, 2010; Strom & Strom, 2015).

The critical dynamic involves the intersection of these two parallel processes: societal transformation *and* generational values. As Mannheim (1952) established, generations form around shared consciousness shaped by historical events, economic conditions, and social forces that influence workplace values and behaviors. The question becomes not whether Generation Z is changing policing culture, but rather how Generation Z officers, given the values they developed through their formative experiences, experience and navigate the workplace in law enforcement.

Since police culture remained remarkably stable for decades, enabling extensive scholarly documentation, contemporary departments may be experiencing changes that

existing literature does not capture. This disconnect between scholarship and organizational reality carries consequences for how retention challenges are understood and addressed.

Therefore, I offer a framework synthesizing this study's findings (see Figure 1).

Additionally, Myers (2005a) concluded that role negotiation does not occur in HROs due to safety requirements and strong cultures. However, this study demonstrates that role negotiation can occur in HROs when: (a) organizational culture is transforming, (b) newcomers hold transactional psychological contracts, and (c) labor market conditions favor employees. This study found that type of role negotiation can differ, where in the original study only task-based role negotiation was examined. This study found that both task-based and identity-based role negotiation were occurring, with the type of psychological contract someone held as a moderating variable. Neither Myers & Oetzel (2003) nor Myers (2005a) accounted for psychological contract differences, however findings suggest they exist on a continuum influenced by psychological contract type; high relational contracts (traditional) lead to more adaptation and less negotiation, while high transactional contracts lead to more negotiation and strategic adaptation. In this study younger officers adapted to technical/safety requirements while negotiating identity and work-life boundary terms.

The original organizational assimilation model assumed cultural consensus. However, this study reveals that when HRO cultures are transforming, newcomers may receive competing assimilation messages, creating multiple pathways to organizational acceptance. This cultural ambiguity paradoxically enables role negotiation even in contexts where conformity is traditionally required. Therefore, I propose a modified organizational assimilation model for HROs, with the core dimensions of, familiarity with others, organizational acculturation, recognition, involvement and job competency, remaining

unchanged. However, the final dimension of role negotiation is expanded and split into task-based role negotiation (changing job duties/procedures) and boundary/identity-based role negotiation (changing psychological contract terms), providing a more accurate account of assimilation in contemporary HROs (see Table 4).

The second theoretical contribution addresses how organizational culture changes in high-reliability contexts. Organizational culture change represents one of the most challenging transformation processes organizations undertake. Schein (2004) argues that culture operates at multiple levels, surface artifacts, espoused values, and deep underlying assumptions, with deeper levels proving particularly resistant to change because members often hold them unconsciously. Cultural change literature identifies two primary mechanisms: planned change initiatives led by organizational leadership and emergent change arising from environmental pressures (Burnes, 2004). Planned change typically follows incremental processes, but research demonstrates that 70% of such efforts fail to achieve intended outcomes (Beer & Nohria, 2000).

HROs face unique cultural change challenges that intensify these typical resistance patterns. Weick (1987) describes HROs as operating within "strong situations" where organizational norms powerfully constrain individual variation. Unlike organizations where culture primarily facilitates social cohesion, HRO culture serves essential safety functions, enabling coordinated action under stress, ensuring predictable responses during emergencies, and building trust necessary for members to place their lives in colleagues' hands (Myers & McPhee, 2006). Consequently, cultural transformation in HROs risks undermining the very mechanisms ensuring reliability, creating legitimate resistance to change efforts.

Despite this resistance, the findings reveal significant cultural transformation occurring in the studied organization. This transformation appears linked to what cultural change scholars term "unfreezing", external crises that destabilize existing patterns and create windows for rapid change (Lewin, 1947; Weick & Quinn, 1999). The 2020 convergence of events of George Floyd's murder, COVID-19 disruptions, and the Defund the Police movement created conditions enabling cultural evolution in ways that either crisis alone might not have produced. Crisis without labor shortage might produce temporary disruption followed by cultural restoration. Labor shortage without crisis might enable gradual accommodation of shifting generational values. The intersection of both forces created conditions where traditional socialization systems could not function as designed, enabling Generation Z officers to enter under unique circumstances.

Importantly, the findings reveal incomplete transformation. New Culture currently coexists with traditional Old Culture norms, creating what Schein (2004) describes as cultural ambiguity where members must navigate competing behavioral expectations. Officers reported progressive policies existing alongside some traditional enforcement mentalities. Some Generation X supervisors expressed nostalgia for "good-natured hazing" while organizational leadership promoted wellness initiatives. Millennials described occupying sometimes uncomfortable bridge positions between generations with different value systems. This cultural ambiguity creates practical challenges for organizational coordination. When some supervisors expect total availability while others respect boundaries, newcomers face inconsistent socialization messages. These inconsistencies may prove particularly problematic in HRO contexts where coordinated action depends on shared expectations and predictable responses.

However, the findings also suggest that HRO reliability may not require the cultural uniformity traditional scholarship assumes. Generation Z officers described performing duties competently while maintaining work-life separation, suggesting that operational effectiveness during shifts may matter more than total organizational identification. This challenges assumptions that HRO reliability necessarily depends on the totalistic cultural frameworks documented in previous research (Myers, 2005a; Weick, 1987). The question then becomes not whether cultural transformation should occur in HROs, the findings demonstrate it is occurring, but rather how organizations maintain operational effectiveness while managing cultural differentiation. The answer lies in developing explicit coordination mechanisms that bridge generational differences while maintaining operational standards during critical incidents. Organizations can maintain reliability by distinguishing between what requires standardization (operational procedures, safety protocols, tactical responses) and what can accommodate differentiation (such as off-duty expectations).

The third theoretical contribution involves reconceptualizing when and how role negotiation becomes possible in HRO contexts. Myers' (2005a) study of firefighter assimilation provides essential comparison for understanding role negotiation in dangerous work environments. Myers found that firefighters demonstrated five of six organizational assimilation dimensions; familiarity with others, organizational acculturation, recognition, involvement, and job competency, but notably did not engage in role negotiation. She explained this absence as functional: HROs require conformity because coordination failures prove catastrophic, and role negotiation conflicts with the standardization necessary for reliable emergency response. Additionally, Myers documented extensive pre-entry self-socialization where firefighter applicants spent months in fire stations before applying,

ensuring that only individuals accepting organizational culture applied while those uncomfortable with total identification self-selected out. Myers suggested that role negotiation incompatibility with HRO requirements represented a scope condition for organizational assimilation theory, while most workers could negotiate roles, HRO members could not because doing so would undermine the reliability mechanisms essential to safe operations. However, the current study reveals patterns contradicting Myers' findings in three critical ways. First, newcomers did engage in role negotiation, actively attempting to modify organizational expectations around availability, emotional expression, and work-life boundaries. Generation Z officers described setting limits on overtime, maintaining personal time outside shifts, and refusing to adopt "cop as identity" framing. These behaviors constitute role negotiation.

Second, rather than intensive pre-entry self-socialization, the department created formal pre-academy and "pre-pre-academy" programs specifically designed to socialize newcomers before official training began. The organization recognized that applicants no longer arrived pre-socialized and adapted by formalizing what previously occurred informally. The department even held courses for officers' families explaining what to expect, acknowledging that recruits entered with limited prior knowledge of law enforcement culture.

Third, unlike Myers' firefighters who described the job as "the only thing they have ever wanted to do," law enforcement officers increasingly viewed policing as one career option among many. Generation Z officers described law enforcement as employment rather than calling, maintaining what they termed "free agency" psychological contracts

characterized by continuous evaluation and readiness to leave. This represents a fundamental shift in how newcomers approach HRO membership.

These contradictions raise critical questions: under what conditions does role negotiation become possible in HRO contexts, and what are the implications for organizational reliability? The findings suggest that role negotiation in HROs depends on specific contextual conditions converging. Labor market power shifts gave applicants leverage, as departments facing recruitment crises could not reject candidates who failed to demonstrate total commitment. Crisis-disrupted socialization created windows where traditional indoctrination processes could not function as designed. Organizational adaptation through formal programs acknowledged changing workforce expectations. Generational value systems emphasizing work-life balance over unconditional loyalty provided cultural support for boundary-setting behaviors. This convergence suggests that Myers' (2005a) finding represented a product of particular historical conditions, which were abundant applicant pools, stable socialization systems, and generational cohorts socialized to prioritize organizational commitment. When these conditions change, role negotiation becomes possible even in contexts where traditional theory suggested it could not occur.

The critical question becomes whether role negotiation undermines HRO reliability. Traditional HRO scholarship emphasizes that reliability requires standardization where members respond predictably according to organizational protocols (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). Role negotiation introduces variation that might compromise the coordination essential for safe operations. However, the findings provide some evidence suggesting operational effectiveness can be maintained despite identity separation and boundary-setting. Generation Z officers described performing duties competently while maintaining work-life

separation. Although some senior officers expressed concerns about Generation Z, a common pattern across generational cohorts where older members often believe "things aren't as good as they used to be," others explicitly highlighted positive traits. Collen (Gen X) stated, "They're so intelligent, they're so much more technologically savvy, they're excellent, they're just really high quality." Sam (Millennial) echoed this assessment: "Some of them are rock stars at a young age. We're like, 'Heck, yeah. This is the person we want, you're awesome.'"

However, beyond general competence, Generation Z's characteristics as digital natives may position them as organizational assets in specific domains. Diego (Gen X) illustrated how technological fluency benefits the department: "a newer officer came in with the idea of like, 'Hey, instead of doing this copy and paste on Excel scheduling system, why don't we make it a digital Excel on the internet where everyone could see it and access from everywhere.'" As law enforcement agencies increasingly integrate technology, including AI into their work, Generation Z officers demonstrate greater willingness to adopt these innovations and can assist older generations in understanding new systems. As "work smarter, not harder" has become a characteristic of this generation who embraced technology throughout their lives, departmental adoption of AI tools such as Truleo, an AI platform designed for assisting officers in report writing, may support retention by creating value congruence with Generation Z's technological orientation (Tassone, 2025; Walker, 2025). While individual officers cannot choose to use AI platforms on their own, when departments implement such technologies, Generation Z officers are better positioned to integrate them into their daily workflow. Additionally, Generation Z officers are more receptive to de-escalation training programs and approaches that emphasize preserving life and preventing harm than previous generations (Sandburg, 2025). This alignment with contemporary

policing values represents another domain where generational characteristics may enhance rather than threaten operational effectiveness. Taken together, these patterns suggest that reliability might depend more on competent in-role performance during shifts than on total organizational identification extending beyond work hours.

Alternative theoretical perspectives support this interpretation. Roberts and Bea (2001) note that excessive standardization can undermine reliability by discouraging adaptive thinking necessary for managing unexpected situations. Weick and Sutcliffe (2007) emphasize "mindful organizing", maintaining attention to emerging threats rather than rigidly following procedures. From this perspective, officers maintaining work-life balance and emotional health might demonstrate superior operational judgment compared to those experiencing chronic stress and burnout. However, identity separation might also undermine reliability through reduced organizational commitment. The retention paradox identified in the findings captures this tension: boundary-setting may protect Generation Z from burnout but may weaken the affective commitment that retained previous generations despite difficulties. Officers who view employment as transactional rather than relational may prove less willing to make sacrifices during critical incidents or may leave precisely when organizational investment in their training reaches maximum value.

This study cannot definitively resolve whether role negotiation supports or undermines HRO reliability. What the findings do demonstrate is that role negotiation is occurring in HRO contexts where traditional theory suggested it should not. The theoretical question then shifts from whether role negotiation should occur in HROs to understanding how organizations maintain operational effectiveness while accommodating it. This represents a significant reconceptualization of organizational assimilation theory's scope

conditions, with implications for how scholars theorize assimilation processes in strong-culture organizations.

### ***Implications for Scholarship***

The three theoretical contributions outlined above; challenging police culture scholarship, extending HRO theory regarding cultural change, and reconsidering role negotiation in dangerous work contexts carry specific implications for multiple scholarly communities. This section articulates what these contributions require researchers working in police culture, high-reliability organizing, organizational assimilation, and organizational communication to rethink.

### **Police Culture Scholarship**

This study's documentation of cultural transformation within a law enforcement department exposes limitations in how police culture has been studied and theorized. Three shifts in scholarly approach are warranted. First, scholars need to move beyond static cultural typologies. The dominant frameworks characterizing police culture emphasize paramilitary hierarchy, emotional suppression, hazing practices, and "us versus them" mentalities as defining features (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010; Ford, 2018; Hall et al., 2016). These frameworks describe police culture as a fixed set of characteristics to be identified and catalogued. This study demonstrates that police culture is actively transforming, with what participants termed Old Culture and New Culture coexisting within a single department. The field needs dynamic frameworks that can account for cultural change processes, such as how

cultures shift, what triggers transformation, how competing cultural logics interact, not merely cultural characteristics captured at a single point in time.

Second, this study documents cultural differentiation within a single department, with different generations operating under fundamentally different norms simultaneously. Gen X officers enacting absolute loyalty contracts exist alongside Generation Z officers maintaining free agency approaches, with Millennials bridging between them. The field should account for cultural pluralism in police organizations, examining how competing cultural logics coexist, interact, and shape organizational outcomes rather than assuming uniform organizational culture.

Third, police culture research should consider integrating generational theory. Existing scholarship treats police culture as occupationally determined, the product of doing police work under particular structural conditions. This study demonstrates that generational values shape how officers experience and enact organizational culture. Two officers doing the same work in the same department may hold fundamentally different relationships to the organization based on when they entered and what formative experiences shaped their expectations. Mannheim (1952) and Ryder (1965) offer frameworks for understanding how cohort effects intersect with occupational socialization, an intersection police culture scholarship has largely ignored.

### **High-Reliability Organization Theory**

The finding that HRO culture is undergoing significant transformation, and that this transformation has not (yet) produced observable catastrophic reliability failures challenges

foundational assumptions in HRO scholarship. First, HRO scholars must develop theoretical frameworks for cultural change in high-reliability contexts, not merely cultural stability. Existing HRO theory (Weick, 1987; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001; Myers & McPhee, 2006) has focused predominantly on how strong cultures maintain reliability, how shared mental models, coordinated action, and collective mindfulness prevent catastrophic failures. This emphasis on stability, while important, leaves the field without tools for understanding what happens when HRO cultures transform. This study demonstrates that such transformation can occur. The field now needs frameworks for how HROs manage transitions between cultural states without catastrophic reliability failures.

Additionally, Senior officers in this study expressed concern that employment-framed officers may be less reliable during critical incidents, a concern grounded in HRO theory's emphasis on total commitment (Mayer & Davis, 1999; Weick & Roberts, 1993). However, this concern has been treated as a given rather than subjected to empirical scrutiny. The field must recognize that what has been framed as an established principle, that total identification is necessary for HRO reliability may in fact be an artifact of studying HROs during periods of stable socialization and labor surplus, when total identification and reliable performance co-occurred without the possibility of disentangling them.

### **Organizational Assimilation and Socialization**

The finding that role negotiation is occurring in an HRO context where foundational research (Myers, 2005a) concluded it could not carries implications that extend beyond law enforcement to how the field conceptualizes assimilation processes in strong-culture organizations. First, Myers' (2005a) scope condition that role negotiation does not occur in

HROs could be reconceptualized as historically contingent rather than structurally inherent. This study identified specific conditions under which role negotiation emerged: labor market power shifts, crisis-disrupted socialization, organizational adaptation through formal programs, and generational value systems emphasizing work-life balance. These conditions suggest that the absence of role negotiation Myers documented reflected a particular configuration of labor markets (surplus), socialization systems (stable), and cohort values (favoring organizational commitment) rather than a permanent feature of HRO organizing. The scope condition could be understood as conditional: role negotiation is absent in HROs *when* these contextual factors align, not *because* HRO work inherently precludes it.

Second, the organizational assimilation model should incorporate a two-dimensional role negotiation framework. This study demonstrates that task-based role negotiation (changing job duties and procedures) and identity/boundary-based role negotiation (changing psychological contract terms, work-life expectations, and identity framing) operate as distinct dimensions that may be moderated by psychological contract type. Officers with relational contracts adapted more to organizational expectations and negotiated less, while those with transactional contracts negotiated more and adapted strategically — accepting task requirements while resisting identity demands. The modified assimilation model proposed in this study (Table 4) refines organizational assimilation theory by specifying *what* newcomers negotiate, not merely *whether* they negotiate.

Third, psychological contract theory should be integrated into organizational assimilation research as a moderating framework. Neither Myers and Oetzel (2003) nor Myers (2005a) accounted for psychological contract differences when examining

assimilation outcomes. This study demonstrates that contract type, relational, transactional-obligatory, or transactional-free-agency shapes how newcomers engage with each assimilation dimension. This finding exposes a gap in assimilation theory: the existing model assumes that organizational socialization tactics operate uniformly on newcomers, but the psychological contracts newcomers bring with them appear to moderate how those tactics are received, interpreted, and responded to.

### **Organizational Communication Broadly**

Two findings from this study could hold implications for organizational communication scholarship beyond the specific contexts of policing and HROs. First, intergenerational communication in high-stakes organizational contexts warrants recognition as a distinct area of scholarly inquiry. This study identifies intergenerational workplace interactions as the primary site where cultural transformation is being negotiated. The competing communicative norms documented here — deference versus questioning, identity language ("I am") versus employment language ("I work"), relational versus transactional reciprocity expectations represent different organizing logics in direct tension. The analytical framework developed here, such as tracking how generational cohorts communicatively construct different relationships to the organization through identity language, reciprocity expectations, and boundary-setting practices may prove transferable to other high-stakes professional contexts where generational workforce transitions are occurring, including healthcare, military, and emergency services.

Second, the retention paradox identified in this study may represent a generalizable phenomenon extending beyond law enforcement. The paradox that wellness initiatives

designed to prevent burnout may inadvertently weaken the affective commitment that historically sustained organizational membership could operate in any organization where strong identification traditionally drove retention. Organizational communication scholars are particularly well-positioned to investigate this phenomenon because the paradox manifests through communicative processes: how organizations frame wellness messages, how those messages interact with existing cultural narratives about commitment, and how members interpret competing signals about whether boundaries represent healthy professionalism or insufficient dedication. Putnam et al.'s (2016) paradox framework, applied here to the identity-commitment tension, offers a productive lens for analyzing similar contradictions in sectors where wellness initiatives intersect with strong-culture traditions.

### **Practical Implications**

These findings carry implications for law enforcement leadership, policy makers across first responder sectors, and training personnel navigating cultural transformation and generational workforce shifts. If Generation Z officers operate under transactional psychological contracts characterized by continuous evaluation and readiness to leave, traditional retention strategies designed for relational contracts will prove ineffective. Organizations may need to accept that shorter careers represent new norms rather than retention failures, requiring redefinition of "successful retention." Organizations could create multiple entry and exit points that legitimize career fluidity, where officers serve in patrol and then transition to other organizational areas as non-sworn individuals in more administrative roles, potentially returning to patrol or specialty positions later. This approach accommodates contemporary workforce values for job-hopping, while preventing officers

from staying "too long" and becoming jaded, as several participants described and many younger officers feared.

The central challenge involves systemic loss of expertise when shorter-tenure officers transition or exit. When an experienced officer leaves, years of accumulated knowledge, such as which community members to contact during disputes, which de-escalation approaches work in particular apartment complexes, how to navigate departmental processes, disappears with them. Traditional informal knowledge transfer occurring during shift changes or casual hallway conversations represents a high-risk strategy in high-turnover contexts. Organizations could implement formalized knowledge management systems that capture this tacit expertise and convert it into explicit, searchable, actionable information.

This would require multiple coordinated mechanisms. When officers advance in rank or transfer to specialty assignments, departments could mandate structured "expertise handoff sessions." For example, when an officer promotes to sergeant, they would conduct a documented briefing for officers aspiring to that role, explaining particular actions that facilitated their advancement, such as how they built credibility with command staff, which training programs proved most valuable, or how they balanced competing priorities. These sessions could be recorded and transcribed, with key insights tagged by topic (leadership development, specialty unit preparation, promotional process navigation) and stored in a searchable database. An officer considering promotion could then query the system for advice from multiple officers who successfully made that transition, rather than relying on one informal mentor's perspective.

Similarly, enhanced exit interviews could systematically extract operational knowledge. Instead of brief, generic questionnaires, departing officers would participate in

semi-structured interviews using the Critical Decision Method (PERF, 2016), which involves cognitive probes that reveal expert decision-making. An interviewer might walk through a complex incident: "What cues made you decide to call for backup rather than proceed? What information were you trying to gather when you approached the subject? What alternative tactics did you consider?" These responses, transcribed and indexed by scenario type (domestic violence calls, mental health crises, traffic stops escalating to use-of-force), could then become accessible case studies. When a new officer encounters their first mental health crisis, they could search "mental health call de-escalation" and access transcribed wisdom from a dozen experienced officers describing their thought processes during similar situations.

Technology would make this knowledge retrievable at the point of need. AI-powered systems could enable officers to query departmental databases conversationally. An officer reassigned to a new location could ask, "What are the recurring neighborhood disputes on the 400 block of Main Street?" and receive synthesized information from previous officers' who had worked at this location and documented their experiences, such as the particular addresses with history of noise complaints, key community liaisons who help resolve conflicts, businesses with frequent shoplifting. This provides context that previously took years to accumulate through experience. Internal wikis would function as living process libraries, containing step-by-step guides for recurring but infrequent tasks like requesting overtime approval, processing various evidence types, or coordinating with specialized units. When a process changes, the wiki gets updated once rather than requiring individual officers to discover changes through trial and error.

Additionally, to engage Generation Z officers who expect interactive digital experiences, departments should implement gamification strategies. Officers earn digital badges for documented expertise areas, such as "Community Policing Expert" for uploading successful engagement strategies, "Training Contributor" for creating instructional content. Leaderboards could display top wiki contributors, while peer recognition systems allow officers to "thank" colleagues whose documented knowledge helped them handle situations effectively. This transforms knowledge sharing from administrative burden into source of professional recognition and social capital within the organization. Furthermore, microlearning platforms could be used to deliver expertise in three-to-five-minute mobile-accessible lessons. A departing detective could record a brief video demonstrating a particular digital forensics technique, which gets assigned to their successor during onboarding. This "show me, don't tell me" approach packages decades of field experience into digestible formats accessible during officers' flow of work rather than requiring separate training sessions. An example of how this could look can be phased in, is shown in Model 1.

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#### Model 1

### **Implementation Strategy**

#### **Phase 1: Foundation**

*Objective: Establish core infrastructure and demonstrate immediate value*

- **AI Transcription and Report Assistants:** Deploy voice-to-text systems that convert officer dictation into structured reports following departmental templates. Officers dictate incident narratives in the field, and AI generates formatted reports, saving 2-3 hours per shift while improving documentation quality and consistency. This immediate time savings builds organizational buy-in for subsequent phases.
- **Microlearning and Mobile Access:** Launch mobile-accessible platforms delivering 3-5 minute training modules on procedures, legal updates, and tactical refreshers. Officers access bite-sized lessons during downtime between calls, enabling just-in-time learning without scheduling separate training sessions. Content can be consumed on smartphones or tablets, aligning with Generation Z's digital-first preferences.
- **Internal Wikis and Digital Handover Protocols:** Create searchable internal knowledge repositories with standardized templates for shift changes, position transfers, and project transitions. Officers complete digital checklists documenting

ongoing cases, key community contacts, and unresolved issues before any transition. This standardizes what was previously informal hallway knowledge transfer.

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## **Phase 2: Engagement**

*Objective: Sustain active knowledge sharing through recognition and feedback systems*

- **Digital Badges and Leaderboards:** Implement gamification rewarding knowledge contributions. Officers earn visible digital badges for expertise areas ("Community Policing Expert," "Training Contributor") displayed on internal profiles. Leaderboards showcase top wiki contributors and microlearning creators, creating professional recognition beyond formal rank structures. This transforms documentation from administrative burden to source of organizational prestige. In addition, they could also receive a salary increase based on how many digital badges they receive.
  - **Social Recognition Platforms:** Enable peer-to-peer acknowledgment systems where officers "thank" or "congratulate" colleagues whose documented knowledge helped them handle situations effectively. Making contributions visible and valued builds collaborative culture while providing the frequent feedback Generation Z expects. Recognition becomes decentralized rather than dependent solely on supervisor acknowledgment.
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## **Phase 3: Process Formalization**

*Objective: Embed knowledge management into organizational processes and career lifecycle*

- **Formal Expertise Sharing Sessions:** Require officers advancing in rank or transferring to specialty assignments to conduct documented briefings for personnel aspiring to those positions. Sessions are recorded, transcribed, and tagged by topic (promotional strategies, specialty unit preparation, leadership development). This reframes advancement as an organizational knowledge event requiring the rising officer to mentor others, creating searchable repositories of career development wisdom.
- **Enhanced Offboarding Knowledge Transfer Plans:** Mandate structured exit processes for all departing personnel regardless of exit circumstances. Officers participate in semi-structured interviews using cognitive probes that capture expert decision-making ("What cues did you notice?" "What alternatives did you consider?"), complete documentation audits ensuring critical information is recorded, and create successor briefings. Departments capture decades of operational wisdom before it walks out the door.
- **Alumni Expert Registries:** Establish formal networks maintaining connections with retired officers who volunteer as subject matter experts, community liaisons, or mentors for current personnel. Retirees receive periodic invitations to professional development events, can be consulted on specialized topics, and serve as advocates for community-police relations. This preserves access to expertise beyond formal employment while recognizing that career mobility doesn't require severing organizational ties.
- **Advanced AI Synthesis:** Deploy knowledge graph systems and large language model agents enabling conversational queries of institutional memory. Officers ask natural

language questions like "What are effective de-escalation tactics for mental health crises in apartment settings?" and receive synthesized answers from multiple documented sources with citations for verification. This creates fully searchable organizational brain accessible at point of need during field operations.

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#### **Phase 4: Long-Term Integration**

*Objective: Fully integrating knowledge management in how the organization operates and develops members*

- **Policy Integration:** Embed knowledge management requirements into promotion criteria, performance evaluations, and standard operating procedures. Officers cannot advance without documenting expertise for successors. Supervisors are evaluated on how effectively their units capture and share knowledge. Knowledge contribution becomes formalized expectation rather than voluntary activity.
  - **Continuous Improvement Cycles:** Establish quarterly reviews analyzing which knowledge systems are being used, which sit idle, and what gaps remain. Survey officers about knowledge needs and usability of existing systems. Update and refine based on actual usage patterns rather than assumptions about what should work.
  - **Succession Planning Integration:** Link knowledge management systems directly to succession planning. When critical positions face upcoming vacancies due to retirement or transfer, HR can identify which documented expertise exists and what knowledge gaps need urgent capture. This enables proactive knowledge preservation rather than reactive loss mitigation.
  - **Cross-Departmental Knowledge Sharing:** Expand beyond single agencies to regional networks where departments share anonymized case studies, tactical lessons learned, and policy innovations. This creates knowledge commons benefiting entire regions while reducing each agency's individual documentation burden.
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Furthermore, aligning with younger generations' preference for respect for ideas over hierarchical rank (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021; Pichler et al., 2021), organizations could implement bidirectional accountability through anonymous leadership evaluations. A bi-annual, department-wide leadership evaluation process could enable deputies at all ranks to provide anonymous feedback on supervisors and command staff, creating upward accountability alongside traditional downward evaluation. Platforms such as ExploranceBlue could securely distribute and collect confidential evaluations, with officer identifiers disassociated from responses at submission. Human Resources could then receive only aggregated reports summarizing trends and themes without individual attribution. This process would serve multiple purposes: empowering lower-ranking deputies to share experiences without fear of retaliation, fostering a culture of mutual accountability where

leadership is evaluated and expected to grow, and providing clear data for addressing persistent concerns before they escalate to increase the retention crisis. Such systems acknowledge Generation Z's expectation for frequent feedback and flatter organizational structures while maintaining operational hierarchy necessary for HRO functioning. By aligning organizational practices with generational values, bidirectional accountability may facilitate the value congruence that predicts retention (Edwards & Cable, 2009).

Maintaining positive alumni relationships recognizes that former officers may return or serve as community advocates, providing ongoing organizational value beyond formal employment. Creating formal alumni networks, inviting retired officers to serve as mentors, or maintaining contact through periodic professional development opportunities ensures that transitions don't sever organizational connections. When officers view career mobility as legitimate rather than organizational abandonment, they maintain goodwill that benefits both the organization and broader community-police relations.

Next, leadership faces a critical tension: teaching work-life balance supports retention by meeting Generation Z expectations, but explicitly promoting "I work in law enforcement" identity framing (rather than "I am a cop") might accelerate retention crises by reducing the commitment that predicts both retention and performance (Meyer & Allen, 1991). The challenge involves supporting healthy boundaries while maintaining sufficient organizational commitment for effective operations. Organizations must be strategic about which identity messages to emphasize in different contexts. One promising approach involves enabling officers to develop multifaceted professional identities rather than total occupational identification (Cavaness & Gibbs, 2026). Organizations could implement programs enabling officers to develop complementary roles such as, teaching, mentoring, community

organizing, so they are not exclusively defined by law enforcement work. Research demonstrates that individuals with multiple role identities, forming what is termed an "intrapersonal identity network", demonstrate greater resilience and lower burnout because they do not rely on a single domain for their sense of self-worth. (Rothbard & Ramarajan, 2009).

Organizations could operationalize this through a "Dual-Professional" framework acknowledging officers as both law enforcers and subject matter experts in secondary fields. This goes beyond traditional community policing roles to formally recognize and utilize officers' diverse expertise. For example, for implementation agencies could establish internal talent marketplaces, such as digital platforms matching officers with project-based assignments aligned with their secondary skills and interests. A patrol officer with social work background might lead a community mental health outreach initiative; an officer with teaching experience could develop training curricula; someone with youth sports coaching expertise might coordinate departmental athletic programs for at-risk youth. With these formally recognized assignments contributing to both organizational goals and officer professional development. A structured time allocation model could formalize this dual-professional approach. Officers could dedicate 80% of time to core enforcement duties while spending 20% on professional development projects aligned with their secondary expertise.

Critically, these complementary roles should be formally integrated into job descriptions, performance evaluations, and career advancement pathways rather than treated as peripheral "extracurriculars." When secondary roles receive organizational recognition, officers experience them as legitimate professional contributions rather than distractions from "real police work." This formal integration signals that multifaceted professional identities

constitute organizational strength. The approach acknowledges that officers maintaining rich identities outside singular “I am a cop” identification may demonstrate greater career longevity precisely because they possess psychological resources protecting against the burnout that drives premature departure.

Additionally, policy makers and leaders across first responder sectors should recognize that parallel crises in firefighting, EMS, and military recruitment suggest common structural factors requiring sector-wide responses rather than occupation-specific solutions. Shift work itself has become increasingly incompatible with contemporary workforce preferences, carrying well-documented health consequences, such as, sleep disruption, cardiovascular disease, cancer risk, and Shift Work Disorder, alongside social costs including limited community participation, marital instability, and poor child outcomes (Åkerstedt et al., 2022; Luckritz et al., 2023). Traditional totalistic organizational cultures across first responder sectors face similar generational value incompatibility, suggesting that solutions developed in one sector may transfer to others. Cross-sector collaboration could enable sharing of effective practices, coordinated research on workforce trends, and collective advocacy for policy changes addressing structural barriers to recruitment and retention.

Finally, Generation Z officers consistently requested information to aid in their understanding of why procedures exist rather than accepting directives without explanation. Training should emphasize reasoning underlying organizational practices, helping newcomers understand how procedures contribute to safety and effectiveness. Organizations should frame explanation-seeking as professional development rather than challenge to authority, recognizing that questioning reflects engagement rather than resistance. Mentorship programs should carefully consider generational matching, as findings suggest

that pairing Generation Z officers with Millennial mentors rather than Generation X supervisors may improve outcomes by reducing value conflicts while still providing experienced guidance. Organizations should train mentors on generational differences in communication preferences, work values, and career expectations to facilitate more effective developmental relationships.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations should be noted. First, the study examines a single West Coast law enforcement department, and regional, organizational, and community characteristics may shape culture and generational dynamics in ways that limit transferability to other contexts. This department's location in a politically liberal region with a progressive organizational reputation may position it ahead of national trends, potentially documenting cultural changes that have not yet occurred in more conservative regions or traditionally-oriented agencies. Additionally, the region's high cost of living creates complex retention dynamics not present in more affordable areas. Most officers cannot afford to live within the service area, requiring long commutes from outlying communities. While some officers prefer this geographic separation which reduces unwanted encounters with individuals they have arrested and protecting family privacy; others desire to work within the communities where they live, viewing community integration as professionally meaningful. This geographic separation due to economic constraints rather than choice may influence retention patterns in ways that differ from departments in more affordable regions where officers can choose whether to live in their patrol areas. Rural departments serving smaller communities might experience different generational interactions than this urban agency, and departments in regions with

different political climates or demographic compositions might face different cultural tensions or resistance patterns.

Second, the data consist of retrospective accounts of experiences rather than real-time observation of socialization processes. While such accounts provide valuable insight into how officers make sense of their experiences, itself important for understanding retention decisions, they may not fully capture the complexity of actual socialization interactions as they unfold. Officers' retrospective accounts may be influenced by subsequent experiences, current organizational relationships, or social desirability concerns that shape how they characterize past events. Longitudinal studies following officers from entry through early career, combined with ethnographic observation of academy training and field socialization, would provide richer understanding of how transformation occurs in practice and how officers' interpretations evolve over time.

Third, the cross-sectional design captures a snapshot of ongoing cultural transformation rather than tracking change over time. The study cannot assess whether patterns observed represent stable new norms or temporary adaptations to crisis conditions that might revert once recruitment pressures ease. Only longitudinal research tracking departments overtime can determine whether cultural changes prove durable or whether organizations experiencing improved applicant pools will return to traditional socialization practices. Additionally, the study cannot assess whether Generation Z officers who initially maintain boundaries will sustain them over time or whether they will eventually adopt total identification as careers progress and organizational pressures intensify.

### **Future Research**

This study opens several avenues for future research. First, comparative research should examine whether the patterns documented here appear across multiple departments varying in region, organizational size, community context, and political environment. Do departments in conservative regions demonstrate similar cultural transformation, or does political context moderate generational effects? How do departments with different organizational histories navigate generational workforce shifts? Such research could clarify which findings transfer broadly and which reflect contextual dynamics particular to this setting.

Second, scholars should investigate parallel transformations across first responder sectors. The evidence presented here of recruitment and retention crises in firefighting, EMS, and military contexts suggests systemic workforce shifts requiring sector-wide understanding in addition to direct occupational explanations. Comparative research examining how different sectors respond to similar generational pressures could reveal effective practices and common challenges, while also clarifying whether observed patterns represent genuinely generational effects or dynamics particular to certain occupations.

Third, HRO theory development should explore whether organizations can maintain operational effectiveness while managing cultural differentiation. Research should examine whether the cultural ambiguity documented here proves sustainable or creates problematic inconsistencies during high-stakes operations. Do officers receiving different socialization messages demonstrate coordination difficulties during critical incidents? Can organizations maintain reliability while accommodating diverse psychological contracts and identity orientations among members? These questions require research linking cultural characteristics to operational outcomes.

Fourth, future research should examine operational outcomes associated with different socialization and identification patterns. Do officers maintaining identity segmentation demonstrate comparable safety performance to those with total identification? Does boundary-setting predict shorter tenure but higher performance during tenure? How do different psychological contract orientations relate to use-of-force incidents, complaint rates, community satisfaction, and officer wellness indicators? This research may require linking officer characteristics of psychological contracts, identification levels, and boundary-setting behaviors, to objective performance and safety metrics tracked over time.

Fifth, longitudinal studies tracking Generation Z officers over 5-10 years could determine whether officers who maintain work-life boundaries during early career sustain them or whether organizational pressures eventually produce conformity. Such research should examine how those who leave differ from those who stay in terms of initial characteristics, socialization experiences, and career trajectories, potentially revealing which factors predict sustainable careers versus premature departure.

Finally, detailed studies examining mentorship effectiveness could provide practical guidance for organizations. What mentorship approaches facilitate versus hinder Generation Z socialization? Does pairing Generation Z officers with Millennial mentors rather than Generation X supervisors improve outcomes? What specific communication practices distinguish successful from failed mentorship relationships? Detailed communication analysis of mentorship interactions could reveal micro-level processes producing either successful role negotiation and retention or identity conflict and departure.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined law enforcement organizational culture evolution and Generation Z officers' experiences within retention crisis contexts. Findings reveal significant cultural transformation from Old Culture characterized by totalistic commitment, hazing, and emotional suppression to New Culture emphasizing wellness, boundaries, and employment framing, though transformation remains incomplete as cultural ambiguity persists. Generation Z officers engage in role negotiation around boundaries and identity that previous HRO research suggested was incompatible with reliable operations, while intergenerational dynamics function as bidirectional knowledge exchange where different generational cohorts possess distinct expertise shaped by their formative experiences. For law enforcement agencies and other first responder organizations facing similar challenges, the critical question involves not whether to embrace New Culture or preserve traditional practices, but rather how to navigate cultural transformation productively while building sustainable operations in contemporary workforce environments. The convergence of recruitment crises, generational workforce shifts, and the crises from 2020 created conditions enabling rapid change in traditionally resistant organizational cultures. How law enforcement and other HROs respond to these challenges will significantly shape both organizational futures and the communities they serve.

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## Tables

Table 1:

| Principle                     | Key Characteristics                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Preoccupation with Failure | Continuous attention to anomalies indicating potential larger problems, with focus on critical domains, frequently performed tasks, and areas where human decisions have significant system impact                                                      |
| 2. Reluctance to Simplify     | Resistance to oversimplifications and remaining vigilant about weak signs of the unexpected                                                                                                                                                             |
| 3. Sensitivity to Operations  | Awareness, alertness, and real-time actions for effective responses, including extracting valuable lessons from "close calls"                                                                                                                           |
| 4. Commitment to Resilience   | Ability to detect, contain, and recover from errors in an unpredictable environment, with three fundamental capabilities: ability to endure pressure, capacity to recover swiftly from crises, and aptitude to derive valuable lessons from experiences |
| 5. Deference to Expertise     | Granting authority based on expertise, regardless of organizational rank, and cultivating a culture that prioritizes collective knowledge over individual skill                                                                                         |

Table 2:

| Generations                        | Core Workplace Values                                                       | Communication Preferences                                   | Work Orientation                                      |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Baby Boomers</b><br>(1946-1964) | Organizational loyalty;<br>Career as identity;<br>"Pay your dues" mentality | Face-to-face;<br>Frequent meetings;<br>Formal communication | Live to work";<br>Long hours demonstrate commitment   |
| <b>Generation X</b><br>(1965-1980) | Independence;<br>Skepticism of organizations;<br>Work-life balance          | Efficient, informal;<br>Resist unnecessary meetings         | "Work to live";<br>Value autonomy and flexibility     |
| <b>Millennials</b><br>(1981-1995)  | Meaningful work;<br>Transparency;<br>Inclusion in decisions                 | Digital fluency;<br>Informal channels;<br>Collaborative     | Purpose-driven;<br>Flexibility and balance priorities |
| <b>Generation Z</b><br>(1996-2012) | Social consciousness;<br>Flexibility;<br>Respect for ideas over rank        | Digital-first;<br>Social media;<br>Informal interaction     | Values-aligned work;<br>Mental health awareness       |

Note. Compiled from Costanza et al. (2012), Gabrielova & Buchko (2021), Govitvatana (2001), Howard (2024), McGinnis-Johnson & Ng (2015), Myers & Sadaghiani (2010), Pichler et al. (2021), and Schwieger & Ladwig (2018).

*Table 3***Participant Demographics (N=37)**

| <b>Demographic Characteristic</b> | <b>Category</b>            | <b>n</b> |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|----------|
| <b>Generational Cohort</b>        | Generation X               | 11       |
|                                   | Millennials                | 10       |
|                                   | Generation Z               | 16       |
| <b>Years of Service</b>           | Less than 1 year           | 2        |
|                                   | 1-2.9 years                | 10       |
|                                   | 3-5.9 years                | 7        |
|                                   | 6-9.9 years                | 5        |
|                                   | 10-19 years                | 9        |
|                                   | 20+ years                  | 3        |
| <b>Educational Attainment</b>     | High School/GED            | 2        |
|                                   | Associate's Degree         | 7        |
|                                   | Bachelor's Degree          | 20       |
|                                   | Master's Degree            | 7        |
| <b>Gender</b>                     | Male                       | 33       |
|                                   | Female                     | 3        |
| <b>Race/Ethnicity</b>             | White                      | 21       |
|                                   | Hispanic                   | 11       |
|                                   | Mixed/Multiple Heritage    | 4        |
|                                   | Asian                      | 1        |
|                                   | American Indian            | 1        |
| <b>Current Assignment</b>         | Patrol/Deputy              | 18       |
|                                   | Detective                  | 8        |
|                                   | Sergeant                   | 6        |
|                                   | Specialized/Administrative | 4        |

Table 4

**HRO Enhanced Principles**

| Principle                    | Reliability Maintained Through                                          | Key Adaptation                       |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1.Preoccupation with Failure | Wellness programs enable error detection; alert officers catch mistakes | Prevention vs. punishment            |
| 2.Reluctance to Simplify     | Acknowledges work-life integration complexity                           | Holistic vs. operational-only        |
| 3.Sensitivity to Operations  | Quality attention during shifts; reduced fatigue impairment             | Focus vs. availability               |
| 4.Commitment to Resilience   | Organizational wellness infrastructure; sustainable careers             | Systemic vs. individual              |
| 5.Deference to Expertise     | Distributed knowledge; bidirectional learning                           | Multiple sources vs. hierarchy alone |

**Figures**

Figure 1

**Generation Z Retention in Evolving Law Enforcement Culture**

Figure 1: Integrated Framework  
**CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND**

**Long-Term Trends:**

- Declining applicant pools and retention challenges
- Labor market shift from surplus to scarcity

**Societal Transformation:**

- Political polarization eroding institutional trust
- Institutional legitimacy debates reshaping public views of HROs
- Generational value shifts emphasizing work-life balance

**2020 Convergence:**

- George Floyd's murder • COVID-19 • Defund the Police movement



| <b>CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION (RQ1)</b><br><b>Old Culture → New Culture Transformation</b> |                                                  |                                                  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Dimension                                                                               | Old Culture                                      | New Culture                                      |
| <b>Bonding Mechanisms</b>                                                               | Alcohol-centered rituals, choir practice, hazing | Wellness programs, structured team-building      |
| <b>Identity Framework</b>                                                               | "I am a cop" (total identity)                    | "I work in law enforcement" (employment framing) |
| <b>Leadership Style</b>                                                                 | Hierarchical, command-based                      | Open-door, collaborative                         |
| <b>Work-Life Boundaries</b>                                                             | Total availability, sacrifice expected           | Boundaries supported, wellness emphasized        |
| <b>Emotional Norms</b>                                                                  | Suppression, toughness, "suck it up"             | Mental health resources, peer support            |

|                               |                                        |                                               |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| <b>Psychological Contract</b> | Relational (loyalty-based, open-ended) | Transactional (bounded, explicit reciprocity) |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|



| <b>GENERATION Z'S UNIQUE ENTRY CONDITIONS</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>TIMING OF ENTRY</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Entered during disruption</li> <li>Missed traditional socialization</li> <li>Values aligned with New Culture</li> <li>Organizational conditions permitted boundary-setting</li> </ul> | <b>BEHAVIORAL PATTERNS</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Set work-life boundaries</li> <li>Maintain employment framing</li> <li>Seek role diversification</li> <li>Continuous evaluation of fit</li> <li>Request procedural explanations</li> </ul> |



### **INTERGENERATIONAL DYNAMICS SHAPING SOCIALIZATION (RQ2)**

#### **Three Key Mechanisms:**

- Mentorship Patterns (Withdrawal vs. Validation paths)
- Identity Frameworks (Total identity vs. Employment framing)
- Psychological Contracts (Relational → Transitional → Transactional)



| <b>THE RETENTION PARADOX</b><br>Boundary-Setting Behaviors                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>PROTECTIVE EFFECTS</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prevents burnout</li> <li>Maintains mental health</li> <li>Enables sustainability</li> <li>Adaptive for well-being</li> </ul> | <b>COMMITMENT EFFECTS</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Weakens affective commitment</li> <li>Reduces organizational identification</li> <li>Facilitates easier departure</li> <li>Creates retention vulnerability</li> </ul> |
| <b>ORGANIZATIONAL DILEMMA</b><br>Adapt to Gen Z values (support boundaries) vs. Maintain traditional culture (require sacrifice)<br>Result: Healthier officers with shorter tenures            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |



### **RETENTION OUTCOMES**

#### **Influenced by:**

- Value congruence (personal ↔ organizational alignment)
- Role negotiation success (authentic identity maintained)
- Intergenerational support quality (validation vs. withdrawal)
- Cultural coherence (formal messages ↔ informal practices)

Figure 2: Intergenerational Role Specialization

| <b>GENERATION X</b><br>(Born 1965-1980)                                                                                                                                                                       | <b>MILLENNIALS</b><br>(Born 1981-1996)                                                                                                                                                                        | <b>GENERATION Z</b><br>(Born 1997-2012)                                                                                                                                                                               |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>SOCIALIZATION:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full Old Culture immersion</li> <li>• Intensive informal bonding</li> <li>• Hazing rituals</li> <li>• Total availability norms</li> </ul>      | <b>SOCIALIZATION:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transitional period</li> <li>• Mixed messages</li> <li>• Partial boundaries</li> <li>• Conditional commitment</li> </ul>                       | <b>SOCIALIZATION:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited informal contact</li> <li>• More virtual/formal training</li> <li>• More time with family and friends instead of coworkers</li> </ul>          |
| <b>ORGANIZATIONAL FUNCTION:</b><br>Cultural Historians <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reference point for Old Culture</li> <li>• Institutional memory</li> <li>• Ambivalent about change</li> </ul> | <b>ORGANIZATIONAL FUNCTION:</b><br>Cultural Bridges <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Translate between generations</li> <li>• Validate both perspectives</li> <li>• Buffer conflicts</li> </ul>       | <b>ORGANIZATIONAL FUNCTION:</b><br>New Culture Embodiment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Display boundary behaviors</li> <li>• Maintain employment frame</li> <li>• Evaluate fit continuously</li> </ul>    |
| <b>RETENTION PATTERN:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long-term (relational)</li> <li>• Loyalty despite problems</li> <li>• "This is who I am"</li> <li>• High affective commitment</li> </ul>   | <b>RETENTION PATTERN:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Medium-term (transitional)</li> <li>• Time-bounded commitment</li> <li>• "I'll stay for X years"</li> <li>• Moderate commitment</li> </ul> | <b>RETENTION PATTERN:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uncertain (transactional)</li> <li>• Continuous assessment</li> <li>• "I work in Law Enforcement"</li> <li>• Lower affective commitment</li> </ul> |

## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Protocol for Generation Z**

#### **Generation Z in Law Enforcement Interview Protocol:**

*Thank you for being here and helping me with my study:*

*My name is Sofia Cavaness and I am a graduate student studying organizational communication, completing a Master's thesis at UCSB. The purpose of my study is to better understand and learn more about retention in law enforcement, with the goal to help improve the*

*current staffing crisis in law enforcement. My interest comes from my previous work with state*

*park ps and from working with the UCSB police department.*

*The information I will collect as part of this research will be confidential and your identity will not be disclosed. You should feel free to skip any questions and stop the interview at*

*any time. Do you give your consent to proceed. Do you have any questions before we begin?*

*I intend to record this, is that ok with you? It makes it a lot easier for me so I can chat with you and use it like a notebook. If not, I can take notes during our conversation.*

*Additionally, the more examples that you can give the better, because it helps me understand the context for your perspective.*

*Alright, let's begin.*

#### **Tentative Interview Questions**

##### **Demographic Questions**

*First, I am going to start by asking you some demographic questions:*

1. How old are you?
2. What is your job title?
  - a. What are your areas of responsibility?
3. How long have you been in your position?

[previous positions held?]  
[other careers?]
4. What is your education background?

[level of degree and area of focus]

5. **Ethnicity:** White African American Asian Hispanic Pacific Islander Other:

6. **Gender:** Female Male Non-binary

##### **Questions**

1. What influenced you to want to become an deputy?

[e.g.: childhood, family or friends]

2. Why did you decide to pursue a career in law enforcement rather than another first responder or public service career?
  - a. Did you consider other agencies before choosing to work here?
  - b. What factors influenced your decision to join this department?
  - c. Looking back, how do you feel about the choice you made?
3. What stood out to you the most during academy or field training? (e.g., specific lessons, drills, simulations, or interactions with instructors)
4. When you first started, was there anything that surprised you or felt different from what you expected?
  - a. How effective do you think the training you received was in preparing for your role?
  - b. How could the training better prepare deputies for the reality of the job?
  - c. Was there anything that helped you feel more comfortable or confident in your role? (e.g., advice from colleagues, shadowing someone, team activities)
5. When you first started, were there any challenges or traditions you experienced as part of being “the new person” or “trainee”?
6. What do you find most meaningful while working?
7. What are some of your best [experiences/memories] so far while working?
8. What’s has been the worst?  
[How do you find ways to handle these experiences afterwards?]
9. Do you have any specific goals or milestones you hope to achieve for yourself, both short and long term?
10. Do you see yourself staying in law enforcement for your entire working career? Why?
11. What challenges or frustrations might push you toward leaving the profession?
12. [What would you like your colleagues or squad to remember you for?]
13. Do you spend time with work colleagues outside of the job?  
[Do you feel that work and personal life mix?]

#### **Views on Law Enforcement**

14. [What do you think are some of the qualities that make someone a good deputy?]

15. How do you think deputies of different ages or experience levels understand and approach the job?

[such as: attitudes, work styles, or priorities?]

a. When you reach the same point, is there anything you aspire to do differently or similarly?

16. Are there any similarities or differences that you and deputies your age hold that might not be fully understood by older deputies in the department?

a. Can you share an example of how these similarities or differences have shown up in your work?

b. How have these affected your ability to work together?

17. If you could make changes to improve the future of a law enforcement career, what would make the job better?

*Alright, we are coming close to the end of the interview, do you have any final things you want to*

*Discuss? Any important topics we didn't get to/missed? Or any final comments?*

*If I have any follow up questions, would you be ok with me contacting you again?*

*When my research is complete, would you be interested in receiving a copy of my findings?*

*Email:*

*If you find this study helpful and think it could benefit others, would you be willing to share information about it with your peers?*

*Thank you so much for doing this interview with me, I really appreciate the time that you took out of your day to do this. I hope you have a great rest of your day!*

**Appendix B**  
**Interview Protocol for Other Generations**  
**Other Gen in Law Enforcement Interview Protocol:**

*Thank you for being here and helping me with my study:*

*My name is Sofia Cavaness and I am a graduate student studying organizational communication, completing a Master's thesis at UCSB. The purpose of my study is to better understand and learn more about retention in law enforcement, with the goal to help improve the current staffing crisis in law enforcement. My interest comes from my previous work with state park peace officers and from working with the UCSB police department.*

*The information I will collect as part of this research will be confidential and your identity will not be disclosed. You should feel free to skip any questions and stop the interview at any time. Do you give your consent to proceed. Do you have any questions before we begin? I intend to record this, is that ok with you? It makes it a lot easier for me so I can chat with you and use it like a notebook. If not, I can take notes during our conversation.*

*Additionally, the more examples that you can give the better, because it helps me understand the context for your perspective.*

*Alright, let's begin.*

**Tentative Interview Questions**  
**Demographic Questions**

*First, I am going to start by asking you some demographic questions:*

1. How old are you?
2. What is your job title?
  - a. What are your areas of responsibility?
3. How long have you been in your position?
4. How long have you been with the department?
  - a. [previous positions held?]
  - b. [other careers?]
5. What is your education background? [level of degree and area of focus]
6. **Ethnicity:** White African American Asian Hispanic Pacific Islander  
Other:
7. **Gender:** Female Male Non-binary

**Questions**

8. What influenced you to want to become an deputy? (RQ4)
  - a. [e.g.: childhood, family or friends]
  - b. **Why did you decide to pursue a career in law enforcement rather than another first responder or public service career? (RQ3 & 5)**
9. **Did you consider other agencies before choosing to work here?**
  - a. What factors influenced your decision to join this department?
10. What motivated you to stay in the profession over the years? (RQ 4 & 5)
  - a. Do you think your motivations have changed over time? (RQ 4 & 5)
  - b. Looking back, how do you feel about the choice you made?

11. What changes a person as they go through this career? (RQ 1)[OR How do you think you have changed going through this career?]
12. When you first started, was there anything that surprised you or felt different from what you expected?
13. How would you describe the culture of law enforcement when you first joined compared to today? (RQ 1, 3 & 4)
14. What do you find most meaningful while working?
  - A) What are some of your best memories so far while working? (RQ 3 & 4)
  - b. What's has been the worst?
15. Do you have any specific goals or milestones you hope to achieve for yourself, both short and long term?
16. Are there specific factors that would influence your decision to retire early or stay in law enforcement longer? (RQ 1 & 4)

#### **Views on Law Enforcement**

17. What do you think are some of the qualities that make someone a good deputy?
18. What advice would you give to new deputies entering this career?
19. Have you taken on any formal or informal mentoring roles with younger deputies? (RQ 2)
  - a. If so, how do you approach guiding them?
20. Do you think deputies of different ages or experience levels understand and approach the job? [such as: attitudes, work styles, or priorities?] If so, how?
  - a. What challenges, if any, have you faced in working with younger deputies and how did you address them? (RQ 1 & 2)
  - b. Are there any similarities or differences that you and deputies your age hold that might not be fully understood by younger deputies in the department?
  - c. Can you share an example of how these similarities or differences have shown up in your work?
  - d. How have these affected your ability to work together? (RQ 2)
  - e. Do you have ideas on how to improve collaboration and understanding between deputies from different generations? (RQ 1, 2 & 5)
21. If you could make changes to improve the future of a law enforcement career, what would make the job better?

*Alright, we are coming close to the end of the interview, do you have any final things you want to discuss? Any final comments?*

*If I have any follow up questions, would you be ok with me contacting you again?*

*When my research is complete, would you be interested in receiving a copy of my findings?*

*Email:*

*If you find this study helpful and think it could benefit others, would you be willing to share information about it with your peers?*

*Thank you so much for doing this interview with me, I really appreciate the time that you took out of your day to do this. I hope you have a great rest of your day!*

## **Appendix C**

### **Codebook for Law Enforcement Interviews**

#### **1. Career Growth & Opportunities**

**Code Description:** References to professional development pathways, training programs, promotion opportunities, skill acquisition, and career advancement within the organization.

\*Additional note: Trajectory of career and description of transitions between jobs do not apply.

#### **2. Culture & Moral**

**Code Description:** Department-wide values, traditions, norms, and collective attitudes that shape organizational identity and group spirit.

#### **3. Departmental Policies & Procedures**

**Code Description:** Comments about formal and informal rules, regulations, bureaucratic processes, paperwork requirements, procedural practices, and disciplinary systems that govern departmental operations.

#### **4. Satisfaction and Meaning from Work**

**Code Description:** The rewards, purpose, and identity derived from one's professional role. Includes how officers conceptualize their function, incorporate their job into their self-image, express pride and fulfillment, and find personal meaning in their service. Includes also how others perceive them.

#### **5. Leadership & Management**

**Code Description:** Comments about experiences with supervisors, leadership approaches, decision-making processes, communication from management, support received from leadership, and overall management effectiveness.

#### **6. Compensation & Benefits**

**Code Description:** Salary levels, retirement plans, health benefits, financial incentives, and economic concerns related to employment, whether expressed positively or negatively.

#### **7. Overtime**

**Code Description:** Extended work hours, overtime allocation, compensation for additional time worked, and the impact of overtime on officers' professional and personal lives.

#### **8. Peer to Peer**

**Code Description:** Relationships with colleagues at the same rank, including teamwork dynamics and interactions with work equals.

#### **9. Personal & Family**

**Code Description:** Specific personal or family situations that directly impact work, such as childcare needs, family emergencies, or health issues.

#### **10. Tangible Resources**

**Code Description:** Access to equipment, adequate staffing levels, technological tools, and infrastructure required to perform job duties effectively and safely.

**11. Intangible Support**

**Code Description:** Organizational guidance, informal mentorship, guidance or support

**11. Retirement**

**Code Description:** Planning for retirement, pension concerns, end-of-career transitions, and perspectives on leaving the profession after completing service.

**12. Safety & Job Risks**

**Code Description:** Workplace dangers, physical and psychological hazards, safety concerns, and health impacts associated with job performance.

**13. Suggestions for Improvement**

**Code Description:** Recommendations, ideas, or proposals for enhancing department operations, improving retention, addressing concerns, and creating better working conditions.

**14. Work-Life Balance**

**Code Description:** Balancing work demands with personal life, including scheduling, shift work impacts, stress management, and ability to disconnect from work mentally.

**15. Generational Differences**

**Code Description:** Comparing different generations work approaches, values, expectations, and career perspectives.

**15a. Generation Z (Born 1997-2012)**

**Code Description:** References to perspectives, values, work approaches, and characteristics attributed to Generation Z officers.

**15b. Millennials (Born 1981-1996)**

**Code Description:** References to perspectives, values, work approaches, and characteristics attributed to Millennial officers.

**15c. Generation X (Born 1965-1980)**

**Code Description:** References to perspectives, values, work approaches, and characteristics attributed to Generation X officers.

**15d. Baby Boomers (Born 1946-1964)**

**Code Description:** References to perspectives, values, work approaches, and characteristics attributed to Baby Boomer officers.

**15e. Silent Generation (Born 1928-1945)**

**Code Description:** References to perspectives, values, work approaches, and characteristics attributed to Silent Generation officers.

**16. Autonomy & Control**

**Code Description:** Independence in the workplace, freedom in decision-making, oversight concerns, control over work conditions, and perceived agency in performing job duties.

**17. Organizational Belonging**

**Code Description:** Individual's sense of connection and acceptance within the department or unit, including squad cohesion, peer relationships, socialization with coworkers outside work hours, and feelings of inclusion or exclusion.

**18. Work Environment Concerns**

**Code Description:** Physical workplace conditions, facility issues, isolation concerns, and location-specific challenges affecting job performance.

**19. Training & Development**

**Code Description:** References to academy training approaches, field training experiences, skill development opportunities, continuing education, and the adequacy of preparation for actual job duties.

#### **20. Job Expectations vs. Reality**

**Code Description:** Gaps between pre-employment expectations and actual on-the-job experiences, including misalignments in duties or environment.

#### **21. Gender in Law Enforcement**

**Code Description:** Gender-specific relevance in law enforcement, including interactions with non-law enforcement individuals. Challenges, opportunities, and experiences in law enforcement. Perspectives towards women working in law enforcement.

#### **22. Patrol vs. Custody Comparisons**

**Code Description:** Differences between patrol and custody positions, including (but not limited to) status, working conditions, and responsibilities

#### **24. Organizational Commitment**

**Code Description:** Loyalty to the organization, willingness to remain employed, and emotional attachment to the department.

#### **26. Seniority and Privileges**

**Code Description:** How length of service affects workplace advantages and opportunities, including systems that grant privileges based on tenure.

#### **27. Promotion Processes**

**Code Description:** References to advancement procedures, selection criteria for higher positions, fairness in promotional systems, and organizational dynamics that influence career progression.

#### **28. Skill Development**

**Code Description:** Developing skills for job competency. This can be related to training but doesn't have to be. Examples that relate to this: "I show others how to perform our work", "I think I am an expert at what I do", "I have figured out efficient ways to do my work", "I can do others' jobs if needed".

#### **29. Role Negotiation**

**Code Description:** Attempting to modify or redefine how the job is done. This could occur through offering suggestions for how to improve productivity and or efficiency or wanting to change the duties of the position.

#### **30. Affairs**

**Code Description:** References to romantic or sexual relationships within the workplace, including discussions of workplace romances, their impact on team dynamics, organizational policies regarding relationships, and related concerns.

#### **31. Organizational Knowledge**

**Code Description:** Understanding the department's structure, operations, history, and informal systems. Includes knowing key processes, relationships, and how to navigate the organization effectively.

#### **32. Problems/Issues**

**Code Description:** Any organizational, or larger structural issues or problems affecting the individual or workplace environment or operations.

#### **33. Interesting**

**Code Description:** Use this for any particularly compelling or noteworthy comment from a participant that may not fit into other codes but still stands out as valuable or thought-provoking. (Please use this *sparingly*. Reserve it for statements that truly stand out.)