Social undermining among police officers in the United States.

Weston B. Anderson

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SOCIAL UNDERMINING AMONG POLICE OFFICERS IN THE UNITED STATES

By

Weston B. Anderson
B.S., Utah State University, 2019
M.C.J., Weber State University, 2021

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in Criminal Justice

Department of Criminal Justice
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2024
SOCIAL UNDERMINING AMONG POLICE OFFICERS IN THE UNITED STATES

By

Weston B. Anderson

A Dissertation Approved on

April 19, 2024

By the following Dissertation Committee

________________________________________
Dr. Thomas Hughes

________________________________________
Dr. Kirstin Swartz

________________________________________
Dr. Dennis Hippert

________________________________________
Dr. Ethan Higgins
DEDICATION

To my grandparents, especially my grandfathers, who provided an extraordinary example of the importance of education. To my parents, who provided the means, lessons, and love to get me to where I am today. To my brothers, who kept me company during my journey. To my family, who believed in and supported me. And finally, to my amazing wife, who encouraged me to aim higher than I thought possible.
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ABSTRACT

SOCIAL UNDERMINING AMONG POLICE OFFICERS IN THE UNITED STATES

Weston B. Anderson

April 19, 2024

Policing is a large and critical part of the American criminal justice system. Although a focal study group for research, little is known of how social undermining impacts police officers and organizations. Social undermining can cause a variety of negative consequences, including lower job satisfaction, reduction in work-related outcomes, and mental and physical health problems (Duffy et al., 2002; Hershcovis & Barling, 2010; Sabeen & Arshad, 2019). To date, no study has examined social undermining in police officers within the United States. This qualitative research examined social undermining among police officers. Using a blend of inductive and deductive thematic analysis, the research questions are answered. The sample included fourteen police officers from across the United States who were in leadership positions. The research questions examined: (1) do police officers experience social undermining, (2) how does undermining affect police officers, (3) how do police officers address social undermining, and (4) how do police officers believe police organizations should address undermining. The data was collected using semi-structured interviews. The results found that every officer had been a target of undermining or witnessed others being targeted. Officers experienced a variety of well-being and work-related outcomes. Participants provided examples and suggestions on how individuals and organizations could address
social undermining. Future research should utilize a larger and more diverse sample, especially examining how gender may influence social undermining. Similarly, a sample that contains a wider range of officers, from cadets to patrol officers to administrators, should be studied. Researchers should also utilize a mixed method to find trends of social undermining.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The American criminal justice system is massive and constantly handles some of the most dangerous people in the world. Managing and supervising a population of this size is an extraordinary cost. It is estimated to cost approximately $305 billion per year (Buehler, 2021). Policing accounts for a third of the criminal justice system and is labor-intensive. It is estimated that over 700,000 law enforcement officers were employed in 2017 (Buehler, 2021). Police officers, through formal and informal social control, directly contribute to social order. There were 15,322 law enforcement agencies in the United States in 2016, with 80 percent of agencies employing 67 percent of police officers (Hyland & Davis, 2019). Although job opportunities exist, finding someone to work as a law enforcement officer is proving to be more difficult than ever before (IACP, 2019; Wilson et al., 2010). A Police Executive Research Forum (2023) report suggests that negative public image, poor health and wellness, and a lack of early- to mid-career advancement are just a few of the causes of lower applicants. These unique problems associated with policing, along with societal concerns over policing, have led to a shortage of police officers.

Police officers carry a significant responsibility in society to enforce laws. Due to their decision-making and discretion, officers and police organizations have been heavily discussed in research (Chan, 1996; Crank, 2003; Rose & Unnithan, 2015). In the study of criminal justice, understanding why police do what they do is a constant goal (Alpert et
Research should strive to understand officers and their actions better while on duty, which can improve public interactions and improve initial contact with the criminal justice system. Due to their impact on the criminal justice system, it is also critical to understand what may be affecting police before an engagement with the public even begins.

The life of a police officer is stressful and demanding (Hart et al., 1995). Police officers often experience high levels of divorce, burnout, drug and alcohol abuse, heart disease, PTSD, and suicide (Can & Hendy, 2014; Soomro & Yanos, 2019; Waters & Ussery, 2007). Police officers also experience strain from the interactions they have with the public they are sworn to protect and serve (Gershon et al., 2002). Additional strain comes from community members who may be hostile, the offenders themselves, or emotionally distraught victims (Garcia et al., 2004). Despite the circumstances and with whom they interact, officers must maintain composure and address the problems presented (Adams & Buck, 2010). Consequently, strain may constantly occur as officers go from one call to another. Further, public criticism may make some officers feel underappreciated, leading to an us-versus-them mentality (Garcia et al., 2004). An officer can experience this strain throughout their career.

Supervisors and coworkers are essential to police officer performance. Teamwork is constantly required within policing. These supervisors and coworkers play a role in an officer's work-related success and workplace reputation (Berman et al., 2002; Duffy et al., 2006). However, even those an officer works with can lead to negative outcomes. Alternatively, these supervisors and coworkers can be a source of strain (Duffy et al., 2002). Adams and Buck (2010) found that for a sample of police officers, supervisor,
and coworker social stressors were significant predictors of increased turnover intent, psychological distress, and emotional exhaustion. Beyond the inherent challenges of the position and the difficulties officers face with colleagues, social undermining presents another threat within organizations.

Social undermining is a social phenomenon that involves intentional sabotage from coworkers and others within a business or organization (Duffy et al., 2002). Vinokur and Van Ryn (1993) suggest social undermining are behaviors directed towards a specific person that display anger or dislike, criticism of the targeted person, and behaviors designed to hinder the goals of the target. Social undermining occurs within many organizations regularly; and it causes serious adverse outcomes such as negative work attitudes and behaviors, lower job performance, and harm to personal well-being (Mulaphong, 2022). Social undermining is particularly common in competitive workplace environments, and anyone can be an opponent in the way of a career goal (Lee et al., 2016). As social undermining can cause negative consequences, it is especially important to examine it in policing. As the police struggle to hire and maintain officers due to the difficulties that come from the job, social undermining can exacerbate the problems, causing a greater challenge to fill the ranks (Can & Hendy, 2014; Police Executive Research Forum, 2023).

Police organizations are structured on a chain of command where limited advancement opportunities are made present. Many patrol officers express a desire for promotion as they believe it escapes the strains of patrol work (Gau et al., 2013). As such, when a position opens within a department, many may apply. Social undermining could occur during these times of promotion as some officers will try to damage a competitor's
reputation for their personal gain (Duffy et al., 2006). Further, social undermining may occur simply because the perpetrator wants to make their victim look bad to others (Duffy et al., 2002). In policing, this is contradictory to the typical culture of “emotional bonding and intense loyalty associated with solidarity” (Crank, 2004, p. 6).

Improving the performance of policing is imperative both politically and practically. Police face complex operational challenges, including high stress, danger, and unpredictability (Waters & Ussery, 2007). Having additional stressors outside of these factors, such as social undermining, is more harmful for those in the position (Crank, 2004). Understanding what occurs among officers in a competitive and demanding workplace is crucial to improving officer wellness. With such an understanding, organizational response may be possible to mitigate unhealthy behaviors within the police department. Improving the career field by addressing sources of strain could lead to better job performance, satisfaction, retention, and recruitment (Ellison, 2004; Police Executive Research Forum, 2023; Visher, 2007). When dissatisfied with a job, several consequences can permeate. Employees who are dissatisfied with their job may feel withdrawn, showing a lack of interest and tardiness (Gregory, 2011). The ultimate sign of dissatisfaction is workers not showing up and quitting (Gregory, 2011). Improving work-life balance could improve policing and their interactions with the public.

Statement of Problem

This study seeks to explore social undermining among police officers in the United States. The problems associated with social undermining in police departments could lead to job turnover, exacerbating the police labor shortage (IACP, 2019). Almost 80 percent of police departments struggle to meet staffing needs (IACP, 2019). It has
been suggested that a heightened sense of danger, financial and organizational factors, and general shifts in the socio-political environment have contributed to this increased turnover among police (Adams et al., 2023; Wilson et al., 2010). A more immediate concern is that qualified active officers with a passion for serving the public may leave policing entirely due to the quarrels within the department (Duffy, 1998; Duffy, 2004; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2016). Social undermining is defined as the intention to prevent someone from work success, positive interpersonal relationships, and it negatively affects their reputation (Duffy et al., 2002). If a victim of social undermining, it can lead to a general decrease in quality of life (Beheshtifar, 2014; Duffy et al., 2002; Vinokur & Van Ryn, 1993). Social undermining can negatively affect employee job outcomes, which then can affect the organization and others who serve in it (Eissa & Wyland, 2016). Police officers must balance a demanding and dangerous job and navigate a complex social atmosphere in and outside the workplace (Hall et al., 2010). If experiencing stressors at home and job stressors with problematic coworkers, respite would be challenging.

Policing, for many, is considered an undesirable job. The constant media coverage, improperly trained or problematic officers, and danger of the work may deter many from the position (Saunders et al., 2019). Several studies have discussed the topic of social undermining in the workplace and shown further problems and consequences of being a victim (Duffy, 2002; Mulaphong, 2022; Vinokur & Van Ryn, 1993). If police organizations experience social undermining, the job would become even less desirable for future and current officers. Some police departments address the spread of
misinformation within the department through policy. These policies may address retaliatory unsubstantiated rumors and provide consequences. However, some policies define it and state there will be no disciplinary action for such behavior. With no unified or consistent way to handle undermining behaviors, it could breed further behavior. While other disciplines have examined social undermining in organizations, this research addresses an area ignored in the policing literature. This area specifically aims to understand if social undermining is occurring among police officers and what the consequences may be to the officers.

**Purpose of the study**

This study focuses on police officers' experiences with social undermining throughout their careers. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the current study has three main objectives. First, to explore if social undermining occurs for police officers. Second, this research sought to ask why the officers thought the perpetrators undermined them and the consequences of this undermining behavior. Third, this study seeks to capture specific experiences of social undermining and explore their impact on the officers and their careers. This research adds to an essential and virtually untapped area of policing. Only a modest number of studies have examined how interactions with coworkers can influence an officer, but only a few have studied undermining (Adams & Buck, 2010; Patterson, 2003). Understanding how social undermining may affect police officers can be crucial to understanding their reactions and behaviors on the job. Furthermore, understanding this phenomenon can lead to recommendations that improve police officers' lives, which could contribute to improved policing across the country.

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1 See relevant statutes in Appendix 1.
**Nature of the study**

This qualitative research utilized a thematic analysis study of police officers' experience with social undermining. Thematic analysis is a method in which themes or patterns are identified and analyzed within the data (Lochmiller, 2021). For the analysis of this study, a hybrid technique of inductive and deductive thematic analysis was used (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). According to Nowel et al. (2017), it provides freedom from a theory and allows the examination of different perspectives that may bring about unanticipated insights.

With the limited research in the field, the researcher sought to approach the study with the aim of having the participants share their thoughts on undermining and its role in their careers and lives. Thematic analysis allowed the researcher to discuss the topic with police officers and allowed themes and concepts to emerge from the data (Nowell et al., 2017). The researcher organized and conducted semi-structured interviews and recorded interviewees' experiences and opinions on social undermining. Semi-structured interviews were used as they grant a broader range of responses, flexibility, and adaptability.

With research questions in mind, thematic analysis helps the researcher extract themes from participant responses. The participants for this study were a cohort of police managers from around the United States. Interviewing a stranger about personal problems can be daunting, so steps were taken to build rapport with the officers beforehand. With semi-structured interviews, the researcher asked questions that officers could answer, which were later analyzed using thematic analysis. Using this analytic strategy allowed the police officers' experiences to address the proposed research questions.
Research Questions

RQ1. Do police officers experience social undermining?
RQ2. How does undermining affect police officers?
RQ3. How do police officers address undermining?
RQ4. How do police officers believe police organizations should address undermining?

Significance of the study

Police officers in the United States play a critical role in protecting citizens and maintaining order. Thousands of police officers work each day to serve the needs of their communities. As a result, the need to retain qualified officers to fulfill these needs is crucial. This study explores police officers' reported experiences with social undermining in their police departments. The study aims to determine whether social undermining occurred for a convenience sample of officers from across the country. Although social undermining has been a heavily studied topic among businesses and other organizations, it has not received substantial attention in the policing literature (Duffy, 2002; Duffy et al., 2012; Greenbaum et al., 2012; Hershcovis, 2011). This may be the first qualitative study in policing to ask about social undermining and its impact on officers and law enforcement organizations. The findings of this qualitative approach shed light on the nature and extent of a potentially serious problem occurring behind the walls of police organizations.

The results of this study adds to the extant policing research by better understanding police in four ways. First, the study explores whether social undermining is occurring within police organizations. Second, what sort of impact does it have on the...
officers if it is occurring? Third, what can an officer do, at an individual level, to address undermining? Fourth, from a policy perspective, potential strategies or approaches to addressing social undermining are discussed. This may be significant because programs or policies could be implemented to improve the longevity of those in the career and the quality of life for officers. Addressing this problem may lead to improvements in overall work performance and attitudes. This study could make essential changes in the field by impacting policy, perception of policing, and officer wellness. Chapter 2 will discuss the current literature on social undermining, police culture, and the research on social undermining and police. Chapter 3 will examine the methods of how the study was conducted, the sample, and the procedures taken. Chapter 4 will cover the results, including major themes of social undermining, how it impacted officers, how officers may be able to address undermining, and how officers believe agencies should address undermining. Chapter 5 summarizes the findings, offers policy implications, explains the limitations of the study, and encourages future research in social undermining.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Police research has been a salient topic in the field of criminal justice for the last several decades. However, only a tiny portion of the literature has examined the problems police officers experience within their departments. This chapter aims to define social undermining, the process by which one is undermined, and what research has shown are the consequences of this behavior.

To accomplish this, social undermining will be defined and examined. Typically, the motivating factors related to undermining are envy and jealousy, which will be discussed. Next, the tools of rumors and gossip within the workplace will be considered in terms of how they may execute social undermining behaviors. The consequences of social undermining are offered, as well as its effects on one’s emotions and work outcomes. Culture will be defined, and police culture will be clarified to explain how social undermining may be further exacerbated within such a unique social sphere. Finally, the police and their relation to social undermining are examined.

Social Undermining

Social undermining can be found in any workplace and negatively impact those who fall victim to it. The term social undermining was initially introduced by Vinokur and Van Ryn (1993), who examined social support and its effects on mental health. Vinokur and Van Ryn (1993) hypothesized that if social support was beneficial to mental health, there must also be an inverse phenomenon. Social undermining was thus defined
as behaviors directed towards someone with three key elements: dislike, a negative evaluation of a person and their actions, and the hindrance of the instrumental goals of the victim (Vinokur & Van Ryn, 1993). Although the findings suggest social support and social undermining as opposites, Vinokur and Van Ryn (1993) make it clear they are not and are distinct social phenomena.

Duffy, Ganster, and Pagon (2002) would create the most widely accepted definition of social undermining. The definition is a “behavior intended to hinder, over time, the ability to establish and maintain positive interpersonal relationships, work-related success, and favorable reputation” (Duffy et al., 2002, p. 332). Perpetrators must intentionally target a victim. Intentional actions in social undermining could include saying unkind or false things, or it could be the omission of specific details. An example of the former is possibly speaking negatively about a coworker or their work ethic. An example of withholding information could occur when another purposefully does not give you pertinent information for a meeting. Undermining could even occur when nothing is said, such as giving someone the ‘silent treatment’ (Duffy, 1998). Social undermining involves only words or actions harmful to a target. Undermining does not include physical acts of aggression such as assault.

Undermining is unique compared to other forms of antisocial behaviors in the workplace. First, undermining is subtle and occurs slowly over time (Duffy et al., 2002). Due to the subtle undermining of behaviors, the adverse effects may not be seen or apparent immediately (Duffy et al., 2008). This may lengthen the time undermining occurs, prolonging the adverse outcomes. Furthermore, the perpetrator has some protection against possible sanctions as it is difficult to track (Duffy et al., 2008).
Second, like workplace aggression, undermining can be active or passive (Duffy et al., 2008). Active social undermining is apparent from the victim that the perpetrator behaves undesirably (Malone & Hayes, 2012). Active social undermining can be a perpetrator talking behind one's back or sabotaging the victim by sending a memo that reflects poorly on the victim. Passive social undermining is the failure to exhibit positive behavior, which is then perceived negatively by the victim (Duffy et al., 2008). Passive social undermining may involve a coworker breaking a promise or withholding important information from the victim. Finally, undermining is aimed at a specific individual with the intention to harm them.

Social undermining is often synonymous with other forms of problematic behaviors. The act of social undermining is interchangeably used with backstabbing or bullying, but they are distinctly different concepts. Backstabbing is similarly defined as the betrayal of a false friend by a verbal attack when they are not around (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Backstabbing is used when someone intentionally speaks ill of someone when they are not present. The behavior of backstabbing is a problem that falls under the category of workplace aggression (Malone & Hayes, 2012). Social undermining is a broad concept and backstabbing may be a single way to undermine. Although a person can undermine by backstabbing, undermining can be done in many more ways. Therefore, backstabbing is more of a tool in the social undermining toolbox.

Workplace bullying has also become a topic of interest and is often tied to problematic work behaviors. Workplace bullying has been defined in many ways but typically is summarized as a behavior intended to continually press, provoke, humiliate, frighten, or create an unpleasantness in someone (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2001). It can
also be defined as causing harm to others in the workplace, which creates a hostile work environment (Cavico & Mujtaba, 2004). Although both backstabbing and bullying negatively impact employees and are intentional, backstabbing is the betrayal of a coworker that can be a one-time incident. In contrast, bullying involves a coworker targeting a victim in a repetitive and persistent pattern.

**Drivers of Social Undermining**

**Envy and Jealousy.** Social undermining can result from various motivations. Envy and jealousy may lead to negative behaviors, such as social undermining. Envy is an emotion that is part of the human condition. Envy occurs when comparing oneself to another. More specifically, envy is when someone lacks another’s achievements or possessions and desires them or wishes nobody else could have what is envied (Parrott & Smith, 1993). Envy can motivate someone when someone else is progressing in their position and, as a result, will strive to change their life to accomplish similar things (Schaubroeck & Lam, 2004; Tai et al., 2012). The type of envy that motivates one to achieve more is benign envy (Van De Ven et al., 2009). Humans differ and may excel in some things and struggle in others. When accomplishments show effectiveness, comparisons may be made among employees. A social comparison is made when people want something others have. Envy could be a motivator but also destructive (Duffy et al., 2012). The destructive form of envy is malicious and can negatively affect an employee (Van De Ven et al., 2009). Although some social comparisons occur in private, most occur in public or through emotional and rancorous public discourse (Duffy et al., 2008). A qualitative study of college students consistently found that envy brought about
feelings of longing and inferiority, along with disapproval (Parrott & Smith, 1993). Envy can also lead individuals to devalue those they target (Duffy et al., 2008).

Often described with envy is the term jealousy. Jealousy and envy are both stress responses (Vecchio, 2000). Although they are often interchangeable, these concepts are uniquely different (Parrot & Smith, 1993). Envy typically involves two people, the person who envies and the target, while jealousy usually involves three people where one is scared to lose someone to another person (Smith & Kim, 2007). Envy, when compared to jealousy, does not involve rivalry with someone else over control of a relationship (Vecchio, 2000). Parrott and Smith (1993) found in a qualitative study that envy and jealousy often co-occur, with 59 percent of jealousy stories also including envy. Although different, they are typically used to explain the same concept and express similar emotions. These motivators often coincide with one another and can bring about social undermining behaviors.

Envy is an unpleasant and hostile emotion that can prompt destructive behaviors (Smith & Kim, 2007; Song & Zhao, 2022). Anger is often a consequence of envy (Schaubroeck & Lam, 2004). Envy is heavily linked with social undermining (Vecchio, 2007; Duffy et al., 2008). Scholars suggest that social undermining is a consequence of envy (Tai et al., 2012). Since envy involves a single person drawing a comparison with another, they may use undermining to target the other to even the score (Duffy et al., 2008). Dunn and Schweitzer (2006) argue that being envious will slowly make social undermining more appealing and lead to engaging in various forms of undermining. Also, group norms that normalize social undermining will alter the relationship between undermining and envy and may make it more acceptable. As a result, those who envy and
undermine often justify their actions, believing that the victim brought them upon themselves (Scott & Duffy, 2007). Eissa and Wyland (2016) found that envy had a significant indirect relationship with social undermining in a sample of employees. Envy and social undermining utilize rumors and gossip as tools (Pheko, 2018). Those envious of others will try to gain social power by speaking ill of others and undermining them (Pheko, 2018; Duffy et al., 2012; Reh et al., 2018).

**Rumor and Gossip.** In social interactions, rumors and gossip are often found. It is often assumed that both rumor and gossip are just an informal way to speak to one another. Both rumor and gossip are assumed to be used to talk negatively about someone or to speak behind a particular person’s back, among other things. Although these terms are interchangeably used in social interactions, they are distinctly different and must be examined as separate social features.

Rumors are defined as unverified and instrumentally pertinent information that circulates and functions for people to distinguish and manage risk (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007). This information then circulates and arises when there is danger, threats, and ambiguity (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007). There are three components to rumors: the situation, the purpose of the rumor, and the content of what is being said (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007). Humans have a psychological desire to understand the motivation behind a rumor, and without knowing the reason, a sense of uncomfortableness is felt (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007).

Gossip is an integral part of society. Gossip has been examined and defined by many disciplines. The definition of gossip is social evaluative talk targeting individuals in social networks that change, require maintenance, or are newly formed (DiFonzo &
Bordia, 2007). It fulfills other social functions, such as maintaining group cohesion, norms, and membership within a social environment while entertaining the group (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007). Informal communication often outpaces formal channels in the workplace, creating managerial hurdles in addressing the spread of misinformation (Grosser et al., 2012). Gossip is often a way to determine a perpetrator’s worldview and convey it meaningfully to others (Foster, 2004). People will speak and share their minds, which may alter the world views of others who see the perpetrator as a friend.

Rumors and gossip could be used to undermine others (Pheko, 2018). In a qualitative study of academics at a large university, Pheko (2018) found that rumors and gossip were brought up significantly throughout the interviews. Perpetrators were found to be undermining coworkers by using rumors and gossip in four ways: to oppress and socially dominate, express envy and undermine, humiliate, and widen or close the perceived power gap (Pheko, 2018). Specifically, rumors and gossip can be used to hinder others through spreading misinformation (Pheko, 2018; Van De Ven et al., 2009). For example, spreading misinformation about a victim could reach decision-makers and deny the ability of one to rebut the information (Pheko, 2018). In the form of indirect bullying, rumors and gossip are used to cause emotional pain to a target (Crothers et al., 2009). Both gossip and rumors can harm organizations and those within with false information as individuals are targeted (Michelson & Mouly, 2002).

Consequences of Social Undermining in the Workplace

Social undermining impacts both workers and organizations (Vinokur & van Ryn, 1993; Duffy et al., 2002; Song & Zhao, 2022). The problems caused by social undermining are vast and cover three areas of concern. The first focuses on well-being,
which examines morale, emotional, and physical health (Sabeen & Arshad, 2019). The second focuses on the emotional effects of undermining and examines one's motivation and engagement in the workplace (Sabeen & Arshad, 2019). The final consequence of social undermining explores work-related outcomes, which encapsulates job withdrawal, lower levels of contribution to the organization, reduced work quality, and employee collaboration.

**Well-being Outcomes**

Well-being is a state of positive emotions such as pleasure in accomplishing goals, life satisfaction, and happiness (Sheheen et al., 2022). In various fields, social undermining has been found to impact employee well-being significantly and negatively (Anwar & Sidin, 2016; Hepburn & Enns, 2013; Sabeen & Arshad, 2019; Shaheen et al., 2022). In one of the earliest studies of social undermining, Vinokur and van Ryn (1993) found that social undermining negatively affects mental health for a sample of recently unemployed persons. These results helped to highlight the impact of undermining in the work environment. Duffy (1998) found further support that social undermining negatively and significantly impacted mental health. Furthermore, supervisor undermining was found to have a much more significant impact than if a coworker undermined (Duffy, 1998; Hershcovic & Barling, 2010). Employee rumination, or repetitive negative thinking, was also an outcome of social undermining, which contributes to depression or anxiety (Song & Zhao, 2022).

Mental health is negatively impacted by social undermining. There is also evidence of negative effects on an employee’s physical health. Negative effects include stress, indigestion problems, respiratory conditions, and, indirectly, reduced self-esteem.
and depression. Duffy (1998) found that undermining coworkers significantly predicts poor physical health. Hershcovis and Barling (2010) examined fifty-five studies, which included sixty-six samples, and found that supervisor aggression negatively and significantly impacted an employee's physical health. However, coworker undermining did not appear significant for physical health, which is contradictory to Duffy’s work (Hershcovis & Barling, 2010).

Stress can damage an employee's well-being (Anwar & Sidin, 2016). If a person cannot handle circumstances caused by the environment, then they experience psychological problems that usually cause stress (Anwar & Sidin, 2016). Stress can be caused by psychological and physical reactions to strained personal resources that cannot manage the job's demands (Schwepker & Dimitriou, 2022). Consequently, experiencing stress can be detrimental to well-being, job performance, job satisfaction, and involvement (Anwar & Sidin, 2016). Only a handful of studies have examined how social undermining causes stress and leads to adverse outcomes for well-being. Anwar and Sidin (2016) collected data on 376 bank employees and found that social undermining directly caused increased stress for employees. Schwepker and Dimitriou (2022) found that job stress increased in 316 hotel workers due to social undermining. In a much larger study, Mulaphong (2022) found that in over 14,000 US federal employees, social undermining that occurred at work caused increased job stress.

**Emotional Effect Outcome**

A demonstrably significant relationship exists between emotional experiences and motivational and engagement levels within the professional setting. Social undermining has been shown to impact employee emotional health significantly (Duffy, 1998;
Strongman, 2013). Although social undermining can negatively affect general mental and physical well-being, it is significant to know that undermining can negatively impact an employee's emotions (Sebeen & Arshad, 2019). Negative emotions could then lead to negative behaviors (Beheshtifar, 2014). In a meta-analysis of workplace aggression, Hershcovis and Barling (2010) found that supervisors who undermine employees increased emotional exhaustion. Employee emotional exhaustion is defined as feeling emotionally drained or exhausted because of work (see also Adams & Buck, 2010). Wesley (2019) later found additional support for this relationship when emotional exhaustion was directly and indirectly caused by social undermining in the workplace. Even more recently, supervisor and coworker undermining were positively related to emotional exhaustion in a sample of 327 service employees in Pakistan (Xu et al., 2022).

Along with emotional well-being, one's attitude towards their job may also be affected. An employee's attitude towards their job can impact performance. Employees who do not like their jobs may be less engaged and lack motivation to do the work they are expected to accomplish. If these behaviors persist, organizational performance could be impacted. Duffy (1998) conducted one of the first studies showing the impact of social undermining on job attitudes, finding that undermining impacted employee job attitudes negatively. It was later found that supervisor and coworker undermining in the workplace significantly affected employee job attitudes negatively (Arani & Fayyazi, 2022).

Most employees in organizations experience social interactions. The relationships that form as a result may be a source of support for an employee. However, social undermining can hinder positive social relationships in the workplace. Eissa and Wyland (2016) found that social undermining significantly increased relationship conflict within
the workplace in a sample of 192 employees from several industries. Interestingly, one study found that undermining led victims to perceive injustice and become morally disengaged (Lee et al., 2016). Feeling wronged, these undermining victims may turn to undermining others, creating a cycle of social undermining in the workplace (Lee et al., 2016). In a sample of doctors, Ahmad et al. (2022) found that undermining led to increased employee cynicism and skepticism. Supervisor and coworker undermining negatively affected employees' verbal ideas and opinions for improving organizational performance. They also increased employees' not sharing their negative thoughts or opinions in the workplace (Jung & Yoon, 2019). Although social undermining consistently and negatively impacts social interactions, some mixed reviews have been found. In one study, supervisor undermining was positively related to social integration into the workplace, while coworker undermining saw a significant adverse effect (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013). As individuals experience emotional consequences, it can lead to negative behaviors, such as social undermining. Social undermining is a harmful behavior that impacts employees and their social environment but also damages the workplace the most.

**Work Outcomes**

Work-related outcomes are essential to helping organizations run effectively and efficiently. When undermining occurs in organizations, it affects the workers, the organization, and its clients/customers (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013). A competitive work environment can be challenging; as employees compete for advancement and better assignments, they may be motivated to utilize undermining behaviors to achieve organizational status (Reh et al., 2018). Social undermining has been shown to affect job-
related behaviors negatively (e.g., absence and counter-productive work behaviors) and perception of the job (Duffy, 1998; Dunn & Schweitzer, 2006; Khan et al., 2022). Job satisfaction, job performance, job turnover, and withdrawal have all been shown to be negatively impacted by undermining behaviors (Beheshtifar, 2014; Duffy et al., 2006; Dunn & Schweitzer, 2006; Greenbaum et al., 2012; Hershcovis & Barling, 2010; Mulaphong, 2022; Sabeen & Ashad, 2019). Negative workplace commitment can also occur because of social undermining (Mulaphong, 2022).

Negative workplace commitment is defined as how much an employee is inspired to do their best work in the workplace (Mulaphong, 2022). An increase in counterproductive work behavior, such as stealing things from work or taking extended breaks, can occur when supervisors and coworkers undermine an employee (Duffy et al., 2002; Greenbaum et al., 2012; Ong & Tay, 2015). Undermining can also lead to interpersonal and organizational deviance (Hershcovis & Barling, 2010; Welsey, 2019). Organizational deviance consists of problematic work behaviors that jeopardize the organization's or its members' health, while interpersonal deviance sabotages relationships or other targeted members of an organization (Yoo & Frankwick, 2013; Wesley, 2019). Duffy et al. (2006) found that social undermining significantly and negatively decreased an employee’s job involvement and their trust in a supervisor.

**What is Culture?**

Culture is a complex and challenging concept (Sewell, 2004). Anthropologists have sought to define culture over the last century (Birukou et al., 2013). It is challenging to describe culture as it is an aspect of social life abstracted from the complicated reality of human existence (Sewell, 2004). Crank (2004) described culture simply as collective
sense-making. When examining several definitions of culture, Birukou et al. (2013) found several consistencies despite the wide variety of communities and people examined. Culture was consistently defined as something shared and learned among groups (Birukou et al., 2013). However, culture is not universally the same because the culture’s content varies widely based on the community (Birukou et al., 2013).

Culture naturally develops through traditions and can vary widely (Birukou et al., 2013). A culture may be based on entire populations of a country or a workplace (Birukou et al., 2013). At the same time, there may be subcultures for specific friend groups or coworkers within a workplace (Crank, 2004; Paoline, 2003). These groups may have their own objectives and behaviors. As culture is shaped by tradition and learned over time, a workplace culture could become a breeding ground for negative behaviors. Carter et al. (2013) found that workplace culture was a significant source of workplace bullying outside of those working supervisors and peers. When a culture fosters and permits this behavior, it can create negative consequences for those who fall victim to the problematic behavior. As culture can bring about undermining behavior, it is crucial to understand the uniqueness of police culture and how its environment can foster more significant levels of social undermining.

**Police Culture**

Police culture contains unique perspectives compared to other work cultures. The nature of police work itself calls upon officers to deal with demanding and stressful situations. Police officers must respond to crimes, handle violent circumstances, and sometimes put themselves in dangerous situations. To handle these dramatic events, showing how masculine and rugged you are, or more importantly, not showing weakness,
is crucial for self-image (Silvestri, 2017). Masculinity has been the backbone of several definitions of police culture in that it is composed of aggression, competitiveness, and loyalty (Paoline, 2003; Silvestri, 2017). Officers must find ways to cope with external and internal stressors from the job (Ingram et al., 2013; Paoline, 2003; Paoline & Terrill, 2005; Silver et al., 2017).

In addition to an environment built upon masculinity, police culture has fostered cynicism and an “us versus them” mentality. It is argued that this macho mentality naturally generates a lack of gender representation within police organizations (Silvestri, 2017). It may also create organizational problems, with police believing that the strongest or toughest officer will advance in the career faster than others.

There are often occupational stressors between police and the public (Paoline, 2003). These stressors can form an “us versus them” mentality in police departments. Due to the solidarity and in-group isolation among officers, an ideology forms that other police officers are the only group that can be trusted (Waddington, 1993). Within police culture, a general distrust for citizens exists because of this (Pauline & Terrill, 2005; Reuss-Ianni, 1983). This creates a unique dynamic as officers are sworn to protect the public yet feel ostracized by those they serve.

**Police Culture Defined**

The first element of culture, according to Crank, is ideation. Ideation is the part of culture that involves people thinking about problems and then finding ways to help organize information to develop rationality in life (Crank, 2004). In a culture, values, ethics, and beliefs are often shared; this is the element of ideation (Crank, 2004). As it requires collecting information from individuals, it also includes ethical prescriptions.
This ideation is how police develop ideas about the world around them and how they interpret it (Reiner, 1992). These ethics and ideas tie officers to their community and help in decision-making (Crank, 2004).

The second element of culture, which Crank labels behavioral, involves the practices, principles, and rules that are acceptable conduct when situationally applied (Crank, 2004). An officer's behavior shapes and develops a police culture. However, behavior can also be dictated by the culture one is in. People act the way they do because it is culturally appropriate (Crank, 2004). Therefore, behavior combines action and thought (Crank, 2004). A handshake may mean respect for someone, but it could also be viewed as someone trying to assert dominance over another. The behavior of an officer is born from lived experiences. As a quasi-militaristic organization, the police academy is like a boot camp (Crank, 2004). A common tactic in these types of training is group punishment, which leads to cadets only trusting each other and not their superior officers (Crank, 2004). It is suggested that culture is a culmination of thoughts and behaviors; humans will act and find meaning in their actions, creations, and interpretations (Crank, 2004). Waddington (1999) suggested that how police talk about their job is typically different from how they behave. This could be a way to justify police beliefs with legal and social constraints over how they act (Waddington, 1999).

The third element of culture, Crank (2004) calls material. This component of the collective sense-making of culture is expressed as information-processing and toolmaking (Crank, 2004). In this element, a physical item not only serves a physical purpose but can also carry a wide range of cultural meanings. For example, a gun can be used to protect or may be used to put food on the table, but it also has cultural value and
meaning (Crank, 2004). Culturally, a gun may be tied to patriotism and can be a symbol against a tyrannical government (Crank, 2004). Although a tool may have a practical use, it can take on a different cultural meaning on its own.

The fourth element of culture is a social structure, specifically the combination of physical and organizational things (Crank, 2004). The physical elements are combined with the organizational elements to create a recognizable social structure (Crank, 2004). This may include the physical geography of a police agency, and the organization's strategies to police effectively in these geographic boundaries. The behaviors and culture will be shaped by this structure. The goals of a police department may be shaped by what is occurring within the physical boundaries of that department. The department's structure and each officer's objectives will be adapted to the responsibilities and needs of those within the social structure.

The final component of culture, according to Crank, is what he calls emergent (Crank, 2004). As people live in the world, their culture emerges and develops because of different elements found in the society in which they live. Culture is formed by decisions that are made in society and how society reacts to those decisions. Culture is formed by how people as a society uniquely and creatively face problems in their neighborhoods and cities. Police culture is a living thing, constantly influenced by officers' actions and creative problem-solving (Crank, 2004). Culture also emerges from people's relationships and from conflict within their social circle. If officers feel unsupported by the community, this may lead to an “us vs. them” mentality (Waddington, 1999; Waters & Ussery, 2007).
Police Environment and Culture

Police departments utilize a chain of command that may contain divisions, special units, unique beats, or geographical assignments for each officer. This chain of command is unique to only a few organizations and can present a few challenges. A chief or sheriff leads the chain of command, and the day-to-day operations trickle down to captains, lieutenants, and sergeants. At the bottom of this chain is the rank-and-file patrol officer. In these quasi-military organizations, the patrol officer is the organization's workhorse (Crank, 2004). Patrol officers respond to calls, make arrests, and protect the public. The superiors of these patrol officers typically supervise and are not directly involved in the daily roadwork. Sergeants are typically the first-line supervisors and connect patrol officers to the high-ranking officers at the precinct (Reuss-Ianni, 1983). Due to the work a patrol officer does regularly compared to those in the upper echelons of the department, two subcultures may form. These cultures are the line culture and management culture of policing, and each group may view things differently. With the complexity of the work and personnel, it is unlikely for those higher up the chain of command to keep track of what goes on below (Crank, 2004). Although minimally supervised, officers tend to appreciate this lack of supervision as officers typically distrust their managers (Crank & Caldero, 1991).

Occupations often create their own cultures with their own values and norms spanning various career fields (Campeau, 2015; Paoline, 2003). Culture differs for many organizations or groups, yet those within share it. Crank (2004) defined police culture in the sense that "culture is a collective sense-making" (p. 15). Policing requires high-performance teamwork at every level (Miller & Rayner, 2012). It may be suggested that
because of the shared tasks and problems faced in policing, a culture forms (Crank, 2004; Paoline, 2003). The shared values, attitudes, and norms that make a culture can help police officers manage the stress that occurs on the job (Paoline, 2004). The culture is created as a survival mechanism due to a career that brings such danger and unpredictability (Chan, 1996; Paoline, 2003). Although police cultures may vary across the United States, there is a shared subscription to cynicism, masculinity, and an “us versus them” perspective (Waddington, 1999, p. 96; see also Reiner, 1992).

Cynicism exists within police culture (Crank, 2004; Niederhoffer, 1967; Waddington, 1999). Cynicism is the belief that people are driven by self-interest (Graves, 1996). Cynicism can hinder the collaborative efforts and relations between a police department and the public (Graves, 1996). Officers are often skeptical of department rules and often will do whatever they can to protect themselves (Reuss-Ianni, 1983). They also express cynicism for the public as they want to protect them but often express their criminality and unreliability (Loftus, 2010). The brooding cynicism can destroy an officer with a loss of faith in police work, corruption, alienation, and job dissatisfaction (Crank, 2004).

The career of a police officer is often challenging. Police officers are given a complicated task. They must respond to various situations involving individuals who are not at their best. Shifts can range from boring to stressfully high-paced. The job of a police officer can be mentally taxing. As a result of the stress and demands of the job, many police officers retire early or die early (Adams & Buck, 2010; Waters & Ussery, 2007).
Police officers must also navigate a complex social environment. Officers enforce the laws and protect the public, while the public is often skeptical of the police. These external stressors are often challenging to manage (Terpstra & Schaap, 2013). Naturally, this distrust leads to social isolation and a need to socialize with other police officers (Terpstra & Schaap, 2013; Silvestri, 2017). This can provide officers with acceptance and a supportive audience to help them cope with the tensions and dangers associated with the job (Chan, 1996; Terpstra & Schaap, 2013; Woody, 2005). Such solidarity can separate officers from the public (Chan, 1996). The need for solidarity is passed on to new generations of officers and reinforced through training (Crank, 2004).

The demands required from policing lead officers to find ways to cope. Some research suggests that the most prevalent ways that officers cope, such as repressed anger, can lead to even greater negative outcomes (Can & Hendy, 2014). This can be unhealthy and could lead to aggressive behaviors towards coworkers (Can & Hendy, 2014). Culture can be a way for officers to cope with their job experiences. Policing culture is formed in response to unique problems that are rarely found in any other field. Those within policing shape police culture. Officers must find ways to cope with the job and develop norms and values as a result. In search of ways to cope, officers form a sense of solidarity among each other, which is an integral part of police culture. Also, part of this culture comes a cynical attitude toward others with whom they interact with. Cynicism may be aimed towards the public, but it may also be aimed at other officers. Although this culture can be a positive way to manage the demands of the job, some officers may use social undermining as a way to alleviate their problems and cope.
Police Subculture

Over a career, an officer is likely to work on many different teams. Where an officer works may depend significantly on their shift. While on duty, an officer may be isolated from the public but work closely with those within the same shift (Crank, 2004). Although all police typically are trained to have solidarity among each other, teams or units may not necessarily work together well across the organization (Crank, 2004). Detectives or SWAT members may maintain a subculture among themselves as they work on cases or events, building further trust and solidarity. Teams within police organizations serve specific functions, such as special operations or task forces, to accomplish targeted goals. These teams are often coveted and can bring about competition to join. Therefore, social undermining may occur when an opening occurs for special units.

To cope with the anxiety and stress that comes from policing, a subculture forms among officers (Brown, 1981; Ingram et al., 2013). More specifically, police would expect three fundamental principles to be a part of this subculture: honor, loyalty, and individuality (Brown, 1981). Honor is typically associated with risk-taking in the performance of their duties. Loyalty is highly valued and owed to other team or department officers. In more practical terms, this is seen as backup or assisting other officers during emergencies (Brown, 1981). This loyalty is essential due to the dangers of the job (Reuss-Ianni, 1983). In other ways, trust is built by officer competency. Individuality concerns an officer’s operational style or how each officer handles calls. Individuality may consist of an expectation that officers must deal with a problem alone unless otherwise necessary. When considering loyalty as a key component of police, the
question should be asked of who they are loyal to. Loyalty may be to a police department but can often be to a clique.

Cliqués or subcultures may be used to socialize after work with other officers (Crank, 2004; Raelin, 2011). These cliques can have a positive or negative influence on an organization. Cliqués can make others who are not part of the in-group feel alienated (Simons & Mawn, 2010). Some officers may desire to be a part of an in-group and behave and act in ways to be welcomed by such. Cliqués can be used to avoid administrative oversight by protecting each other from improper policy procedure usage (Crank, 2004). In some cases, officers may Some maladaptive subcultures have arisen in police organizations. They have, at times, ignored policy to achieve perceived justice. Units such as Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums (CRASH) or Street Crimes Operation to Restore Peace in Our Neighborhoods (SCORPION) have engaged in illegal behavior. The Los Angeles Police Department created CRASH as an attempted solution for gang-related crime, and the Memphis Police Department created SCORPION as a means to address high crime in particular areas of the city. Both groups strived to accomplish a specific task while protecting their members from punishment. Loyalty was formed within these groups, which maintained secrecy on corrupt behaviors until they were eventually exposed. Consequently, due to this lack of oversight and precautions to avoid punishment, undermining behaviors could be exhibited by those within cliques due to the loyalty of its members. Competition may form between cliques within a department, as power and rank become a goal for all involved. This is especially true if the clique has a goal they wish to accomplish and uses social undermining to achieve it.
Police culture is distinctive due to the job itself. With the risk, stress, and attitude that comes with it, a culture that is formed is unique. Police work together when responding to calls and enforcing the law. However, behind closed doors, several issues lie within the culture that can permit toxic work behaviors. Although solidarity exists for officers, when an opportunity presents itself to get away from the drudgery of police work, an officer may seek to take it in subtle ways. The culture within police departments is highly competitive and can radiate toxic behaviors. Loyalty, often found within police culture, can also be to individuals or units within police departments. As such, an officer may undermine when their ally or friend asks or is wronged. Unsurprisingly, this environment can invite social undermining behaviors as officers fight to build their reputations and rise in the ranks.

**Police Organization and Social Undermining**

The phenomenon of social undermining has been studied in much organization-based research (Hershcovis, 2011; Rousseau, 2020). It is often seen that a solid social bond exists among police officers within their department. However, if an act of betrayal occurs in a department, that bond may weaken (Reuss-Ianni, 1983). When you have a work organization with multiple employees, undermining is a possibility. Undermining can be used to hinder one’s relationships, accomplishments at work, and reputation (Duffy et al., 2002). Undermining may be caused by social comparison, emotions, or desire for social advancement (Crossley, 2009; Duffy et al., 2012; Reh et al., 2018). Although social undermining has been studied in other fields, its impact on policing has not been widely studied.
Police department's organizational structure is hierarchical. This means that most of the employment positions in policing begin at the bottom of the ladder with patrol officers and then continue up the ladder where fewer employment positions become available. Due to these higher, limited positions, a competitive atmosphere may occur during promotion time. Promotions come with a range of positive benefits for officers. These benefits include less dangerous work, fewer work hours, a more favorable schedule, more autonomy, and greater prestige. Most importantly, promotions may come with higher pay. These advancements and benefits are highly sought after as officers seek to maximize their retirement benefits as they exit their careers. When competing for a small number of promotions, social undermining may be used to make the competition look bad.

Police departments operate in shifts. Patrol officers are expected to go to their assigned areas and work specific days and times. In some departments, officers may not be required to go to the police station for roll call or other business. This creates independence for patrol officers. Between calls, an officer may have unallocated time and thus can do whatever they want. This freedom to exercise discretion may also lead to problematic behavior. Depending on what occurs during a shift, an officer may be completely isolated from the public. With isolation comes opportunities for officers to talk amongst themselves and undermine their colleagues. An officer may spread rumors or complain about other officers while they are not present. When officers are independent from others, it causes concern for another reason: a lack of supervision.

The lack of supervision in policing is a difficult task to overcome. Those in leadership positions are assigned several officers. Officers are given their own vehicles
and assignments throughout a vast area. Supervision can be challenging with officers so spread out and working on their own. Therefore, undermining may occur during a shift, and a supervisor may not know it is occurring. This is just another example of why the study of social undermining in policing is essential.

Social undermining among police officers has been understudied. A few studies have utilized various samples of police officers when examining social undermining in the workplace. Duffy et al. (2002) used a survey that asked police officers in the Republic of Slovenia about their experiences with undermining. Using hierarchical multiple regression, Duffy et al. (2002) found that higher supervisor and coworker undermining led to worse individual and work-related outcomes, specifically counterproductive work behaviors. It was also found that supervisor undermining is more strongly related to the employee's outcomes than a supervisor's support (Duffy et al., 2002).

Duffy et al. (2006) would later use the same sample to test fairness theory. It was found that both individual-level supervisor and coworker undermining were significantly correlated to negative job satisfaction, positive intention to quit, counterproductive work behaviors, and depression (Duffy et al., 2006). In a hierarchical linear modeling analysis, supervisor undermining was significant in lower job satisfaction, increased intention to quit, counterproductive work behaviors, and depression. This would give the sense of being singled out, and thus exacerbate the adverse outcomes (Duffy et al., 2006).

Coworker undermining found a different outcome by only being significant in both increased intentions to quit and depression (Duffy et al., 2006).

In a study from the United Kingdom, Miller and Rayner (2012) sought to find how bullying plays a role in a high-teamwork police environment. The qualitative study
sought to examine how officers perceived bullying behavior. Several bullying behaviors were identified, such as threats to professional status, threats to personal standing, isolation, overwork, and destabilization (Miller & Rayner, 2012). Interestingly, the results showed that these negative behaviors were tolerated if the victim saw it as a rite of passage into a group. However, isolation from the group was never seen as nondamaging (Miller & Rayner, 2012).

When examining power in the workplace among the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), three dimensions of power were presented. The third dimension of power is subtle and exists when employees do not recognize problematic behaviors happening to and around them (McKay, 2014). In the second dimension of power, employees recognize the behavior and complain about it to their supervisors. However, management is not willing to do anything to address the issue (McKay, 2014). The first form of power suggests that an organization does not stop open acts of power from one individual to another (McKay, 2014). McKay (2014) suggests that a problem exists and continues to increase in the RCMP. This bullying behavior is subtle, and the management does not recognize it or address it in any way (McKay, 2014). These unaddressed bullying behaviors can dramatically and negatively affect police organizations.

Our current understanding of social undermining in the policing context is limited, yet it is a phenomenon that police organizations are not immune to. In fact, given the nature of police work and the unique organizational structure, social undermining may be even more prevalent and impactful in this setting. The implications of social undermining on police organizations can be significant, underscoring the urgency of understanding how, why, and when it occurs. This understanding is crucial for
management to effectively combat this phenomenon and safeguard the well-being and productivity of their officers.
This study aims to examine social undermining in the field of policing. Social undermining among police officers has been minimally examined and deserves attention. Social undermining is a long-term negative behavior that hinders obtaining and maintaining positive interpersonal relationships, work success, and a positive reputation (Duffy et al., 2002). Police are bombarded by various work demands and must navigate a complex landscape within the job (Hall et al., 2010; Paoline, 2004). Social undermining from coworkers could negatively add to this work stress (McKay, 2014; Miller & Rayner, 2012). The research plan involves interviews with current police officers regarding their personal experiences with social undermining. The opportunity to talk to officers directly allowed the research to probe deeper into officers' experiences and the impact of undermining.

This research seeks to answer the following research questions:

**RQ1.** Do police officers experience social undermining?

**RQ2.** How does undermining affect police officers?

**RQ3.** How do police officers address undermining?

**RQ4.** How do police officers believe police organizations should address undermining?
Design

With little empirical literature, the researcher first explored whether undermining occurs within police organizations. Following this question, the subjects were then asked about their personal undermining experiences. The participants were asked how these experiences had impacted them. This was accomplished by asking if it affected their relationships, reputation, health, and career. Additionally, the researcher sought to understand how individual police officers and police organizations addressed social undermining. If the problem occurred, how was it addressed by the officer and the department?

A qualitative approach was taken to investigate these research questions. This approach sought to understand what social undermining looked like among police officers and to understand the context of the events. Humans interact with one another in many ways. Interactions between people can be situational. Consequently, asking close-ended questions can limit what can be learned from a person’s undermining experience. Social undermining is the expression of negative emotions directed toward a particular person or negative evaluations of the person to prevent the person from achieving their goals. It is beneficial to capture the circumstances where an officer was undermined and why (Duffy et al., 2002; Vinokur & Van Ryn, 1993).

Several approaches to utilizing qualitative methods in research, such as ethnography, narrative, and grounded theory, have historically been successful. For this research, a combined technique of inductive and deductive thematic analysis was used. Thematic analysis allows for meaning to be derived from the data (Nowel et al., 2017). When using thematic analysis, patterns are used through the identification and analysis
process (Lockmiller, 2021). Because a pattern is being seen, it is presumed that the most frequent codes within the data set will be used as a theme.

The research study used semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allowed for specific questions to be asked while allowing the researcher to go off script and ask additional questions that may extract further insight. Semi-structured interviews follow a regimen, allowing the researcher to move through their pre-written thematic questions as the conversation allows. This interview style also allows the interviewer to ask follow-up questions. Being able to ask follow-up questions may help to gain additional insights into the participant’s thoughts and experiences. Semi-structured interviews provide a way for the researcher to gain participant trust by allowing the interview to be like a conversation rather than an exam. As a result, this form of questioning may also help participants feel like they can be more open and honest with the answers they provide. Being flexible with the questions throughout the interview process allows the researcher to delve into the participant’s responses and possibly extract more information. Semi-structured interviews are excellent for thematic analysis, allowing richer data, flexibility, and unanticipated themes.

Sample

The data used in this study was collected in the spring of 2023 in Louisville, Kentucky. The participants were active law enforcement officers from across the United States. The sample was created from officers attending the Southern Police Institute Administrative Officers Course. This course is a 13-week residential program designed to prepare midlevel police executives to assume higher echelon leadership roles in their
organizations. Ideally, all agencies would have the opportunity to participate in this valuable training. However, the associated costs and lost work time can create barriers, leading to higher participation among progressive organizations with more resources. As such, the research is based on a convenience sample. Such sampling generates a non-probability sample using participants that are convenient to the researcher. Furthermore, the sample all had a management role within their respective departments. While the sample does not represent all police in the United States and is not appropriate for statistical analysis, it provides fertile ground for initial research into social undermining.

The sample used manifests two substantial limitations. First, because it is a convenience sample, it is not representative of all police officers in the United States. Second, the participants in the class generally work for agencies that are highly committed to leadership development and who have the resources to send an officer away for three months. Such agencies may not be typical in American policing. Further, not every police officer may have interest in a leadership position.

The Department of Criminal Justice works closely with the Southern Police Institute located at the University of Louisville campus. The Southern Police Institute offers graduate-level courses to two cohorts of police officers each year. The researcher approached the cohort of police officers, explaining the study and its purpose, and invited them to sign up for an interview. The researcher clarified to the officers that signing up for an interview was voluntary and had no monetary incentive.

The researcher emailed the cohort a link to an online scheduler. The scheduler displayed the interviewer’s available time slots and allowed those interested to choose a convenient time to be interviewed. Those who signed up could not see the names of other
participants who signed up, as confidentiality was important. The researcher then sent reminders to any scheduled interviewees and additional reminders to the entire cohort about open time slots.

The interviewer asked some general demographic questions, defined social undermining, and then proceeded to the research questions. The research questions were slightly altered for each interviewee to help the process feel more comfortable and natural. Follow-up questions also proved valuable and allowed the researcher to probe further into specific topics. The interviews were conducted in a private room at the Southern Police Institute during off-hours to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. This objective was to make the participants feel more at ease and comfortable being open and honest about their experiences.

The researcher would begin each interview with the general demographics of the participants. After the demographics, the definition of social undermining, according to Duffy et al. (2002), was read. The definition explains that social undermining is a “behavior intended to hinder, over time, a worker’s ability to establish and maintain positive interpersonal relationships, work-related success, and a favorable reputation” (Duffy et al., 2002, p. 332). The research questions were then asked, along with any relevant follow-up questions. Additional questions related to the study at hand were included in the script and used if time permitted. The interview concluded with a solicitation for any closing thoughts from the participant.

The sample consisted of fourteen police officers out of a cohort of forty-six, all in leadership positions. The study participants were in leadership positions ranging from chief to sergeant. The officers were from many parts of the United States, with nine
officers from the South, four from the Northeast, and one from the Midwest. The average age of the participants was 47 years old. All officers in the study were male, almost all White, with one African American. The average length of service for the sample was 23 years. Each participant was asked about the size of their department, which ranged from 17 to 4,000.

The objective of the research was to explore the presence and impact of social undermining in the field of policing. To accomplish this, questions were asked to tap into participants' experiences throughout their careers to see if they had been undermined or were aware of undermining. The questions asked, to answer these research questions, were “Have you had any experiences with undermining in your career as a police officer,” “How did that experience impact you,” “How do you think police officers should handle this type of behavior,” and “What ways do you think departments can prevent undermining in the workplace.” The sample size was adequate to understand if this social phenomenon occurs, how it affects officers, and how to address the problem.

**Materials**

The interview questions were designed to be simple and open-ended. The semi-structured interviewing format allowed the researcher go through a list of questions while also to probe further into specific stories or topics to gain additional insights. With open-ended questions, the participants could share information they felt answered the question, providing more in-depth data. These insights could be valuable to the study by adding additional information that the written questions may not capture. However, having a list of primary and secondary written questions aided the interviewer. It allowed the interviewer to maintain structure and have a coherent order in the conversation.
Before conducting the study, institutional review board procedures were followed, and approval for the study was obtained from the University of Louisville. An unsigned consent form was provided to the participant. Due to the minimal risk for those involved, the researcher and IRB deemed it acceptable that informal consent was justified. The form was read by the participant and discussed if any questions were raised. With verbal consent, the participant agreed to be audio-recorded and interviewed. The audio for the interview was digitally recorded. To ensure anonymity to the participants, the interviewer would assign a random name to the participant at the start of the discussion. These pseudonyms, along with any thoughts, ideas, and questions, were written down on a notepad by the interviewer. Pseudonyms were used as it would allow for better flow when recounting their experiences and stories.

**Study Procedure**

The idea to investigate social undermining began at the beginning of the year 2023. The researcher's objective was to study some facet of police that focused on the officers themselves. It was recommended that more questions be asked regarding the topic of social undermining among police officers. Casually asking police officers about the topic appeared to raise significant interest in them. It was then decided to examine how social undermining impacted police officers. With the Southern Police Institute actively hosting a cohort of police officers for the Spring, I sought to propose my research to its administration. With approval given, work began to create interview questions that were targeted to the research questions. Accumulating the necessary paperwork to receive Institutional Review Board approval, the study was deemed minimal risk and was granted. Mock interviews were conducted to test interview time
and receive input from active police officers. These mock interviews were not included in the final sample. After the mock interviews, the researcher visited a class at the Southern Police Institute to introduce himself to the cohort and propose the study to them. The researcher solicited volunteers for the study and began the interviewing process.

**Institutional Review Board**

Before any part of the research process began, the researcher received human subjects training. This training is designed to ensure that research is ethically conducted and consensual. The researcher then applied for and received permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Louisville to conduct the project. In its approval, the IRB noted that the study posed minimal risk to participants.

**Mock Interview**

Several mock interviews were conducted prior to data collection. The mock interviews were conducted with current law enforcement officers. These were done for three reasons. First, to pilot potential questions and determine their effectiveness in soliciting information related to undermining. Utilizing a draft of interview questions, the researcher tested whether the questions were clear and appropriate for soliciting information regarding experiences with undermining. Second, the mock interviews allowed the researcher to practice interviewing and receive feedback on his interview style and the flow of the interviews. Third, interviewing these officers allowed the researcher to gauge the time frame that the interviews would take to answer the questions and not take too much of the participant's time. From these mock interviews, the script was shortened, and some wording was changed throughout.
For the mock interviews, the researcher reached out and asked three individuals who were in the field of policing, either currently employed or retired. Two of the three mock interviews were conducted over Microsoft Teams, and one was conducted in person. The responses of the mock interview participants were not used in the data analyzed for this project. The mock interviews were not included as the researcher had a personal relationship with the participants and believed that could include bias in how they answered.

Once the pilot interviews were concluded, the consent form and a draft of the interview questions were emailed to the three mock interview participants for further review. The researcher asked participants to return written feedback on these materials for review. The researcher reviewed this feedback, and changes were made to the interview questions if needed.

**Informed Consent**

Consent is crucial for all studies involving human subjects. During the recruitment process, the participants were informed that the interviews were voluntary and confidential. Once seated for an interview, participants were given a copy of the unsigned consent form for review, which was theirs to keep. The participants were informed that they were consenting to the study by answering the interviewer's questions and were free to end the interview at any time. During the interviews, the interviewer encouraged the participants to be open and honest about their experiences to better understand social undermining. The interviewer ensured the participants that their personal information and responses would not be shared with other participants. All participants would receive anonymity. Participation would be private, and the names of
other participants would not be revealed. Participants were assured that personal information would be removed during transcription. It was also explained that the audio recordings would be destroyed once the transcription process was completed to ensure confidentiality. All of these measures were implemented to protect the privacy of the participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

Collection

The data collection occurred for approximately one month. Each interview was approximately one hour in length. The time of one hour was adhered to, to respect the time of the participants along with being sufficient to address the research questions. The semi-structured interviews were digitally recorded. The voice recordings were then uploaded into the online version of Microsoft Word. Within the online version of Microsoft Word, an audio file can be uploaded and automatically transcribed into a Word document. The automatic transcription was moderately accurate and laid the foundation of the interviews. The researcher then listened to the audio recording and corrected any mistakes or missing portions that were not transcribed accurately by the automatic process. There are two ways to transcribe a recorded interview in the transcription process: naturalized and denaturalized (Bucholtz, 2000). Naturalized, or intelligent verbatim, transcription adapts how one speaks to remove pauses, fillers, or grammatical mistakes (Bucholtz, 2000). Denaturalized keeps the transcript as it was said, including all pauses, repetitions, and errors (Bucholtz, 2000). The researcher used naturalized transcribing to make the points clear and concise while maintaining the participant's voice.
Throughout the interview, the interviewer made occasional written notes. These notes consisted of assigning a participant a random name. The objective of this was to ensure the confidentiality of those who participated. These random names were used throughout the entire project. Additionally, any other ideas, thoughts, or follow-up questions for the interview or during the analytical process were written.

**Analysis**

When working with qualitative data, text and audio of the participants’ words or sentences are used. During the analytical process of this data, codes are placed on the data to help understand themes and to assist in working with the data. Coding allows large parts of texts to be interpreted in new ways (Belotto, 2018). These data codes may be used to summarize a thought when looking for relevant terms or ideas for the study.

The coding process is a blend of inductive and deductive analysis. Inductive coding means the themes emerge from the participant discussions, while deductive coding is derived from a form of a framework (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This approach was appropriate as little was known about social undermining in the police context. Hearing the stories and experiences of tenured officers helped shape the study. As the topic and questions were discussed with participants, themes emerged. These themes were then used to address the research questions, providing more insight into this social phenomenon.

With thematic analysis, a blend of inductive and deductive coding was used. Deductive coding was present as the researcher provided a definition of social undermining and asked questions about it. Inductive coding was also used as themes emerged from the conversation. The researcher can use this coded data to apply meaning...
and themes to participants’ words. Coding the data also makes it easier to navigate the data as quotes are bundled into specific categories. The software used to code the transcripts was ATLAS.ti. ATLAS.ti was used because it has many tools to help apply codes and organize the text for analysis. Besides allowing the data to be more navigable, another goal of the coding process was to ensure that the participant's voice remained.

At the beginning of the coding process, the practice of interrater reliability was used. Interrater reliability is a tool used to ensure the coding process is as rigorous and trustworthy as possible (Belotto, 2018). With fourteen interviews and hundreds of pages of transcripts, validating the coding process to the highest degree was essential to validate the findings.

The process of using interrater reliability consisted of assigning one cleaned transcript to the researcher and an external reviewer attending the University of Louisville. With several deductive codes created for the first research question prior to the initial meeting, both parties coded the transcript separately using an inductive analysis. Inductive analysis is data-driven and allows the codes to be created without trying to “fit it into a preexisting coding frame or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions” (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 8). A meeting was then conducted to review the transcripts and compare codes. From this meeting, twenty primary codes were created, along with forty-one subcodes, totaling sixty-one codes. The primary codes were created due to similar codes in an initial interrater reliability test on one transcript. With consensus on codes, the process was repeated with two different interviews using these codes. Once the remaining two documents were coded, each reviewer conducted a final meeting to review both transcripts. This ensured that the text was being interpreted
similarly. After this meeting, it was agreed that both reviewers were interpreting and coding the transcripts similarly. The researcher could then continue to code the remaining interviews on their own. Besides the interrater reliability check process, the researcher conducted the research entirely alone.

Using ATLAS.ti, the researcher created the codes and began the process of coding the remaining transcripts. The subcodes were created throughout this process to isolate specific examples and themes. ATLAS.ti categorized these created codes within the program and allowed easy navigation of the themes and quotes of each transcript. This output allowed the researcher to examine the research questions and apply the codes to each question. The researcher then recognized how many codes were applied and what topics were most discussed by the participants. Making subcategories for major themes also made it easy to see how participants were affected by social undermining.

**Participant Trust and Risk**

Police officers experience much criticism from the public (Garner, 2008). Working in a subculture that fuels suspicion of outsiders, police can sometimes be suspicious of others who want to learn more about them. As such, the researcher went to great lengths to gain the participants' trust and open participation. With the participants attending the Southern Police Institute, they were familiar with the faculty and staff that the researcher worked with. As a result, the researcher received support from these faculty members, whom the participants had learned to trust through the three-month program. Additionally, the researcher had worked with police officers in the past, which aided him in setting up a more comfortable and relatable interview for the participants. The researcher protected the confidentiality of every participant’s interview. The
researcher clearly explained that each participant’s story and experiences would help to examine the topic of social undermining, which had otherwise been ignored. The study was also framed to give the officers a voice within the academic sphere.

The researcher ensured that confidentiality concerns tied to the research would be minimized. The researcher informed each participant that any names, locations, or other identifiers would be removed in the transcription phase. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to protect their identity at the start of the interview. The pseudonym was used throughout the process, including when saving the audio and word files. The audio data was stored on a USB in a locked drawer in the researcher’s locked office. After transcribing the audio and removing any personal information from the data, the researcher destroyed all the audio files.

The researcher went to great lengths to ensure complete anonymity within the transcripts. Not only were the participants' pseudonyms used, but any additional names of coworkers or family members in the interview were also replaced with pseudonyms. Names of towns, cities, places of employment, or colleges were also replaced or excluded. After these thorough privacy protection measures were taken in the transcribing process, the transcriptions remained with no personal information that could be linked to any participant.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

In this chapter, the findings from the study will be presented. The findings are organized by the research questions listed in Chapter Two. Through qualitative methods, officers throughout the United States' experiences with social undermining are presented. When necessary, the findings are introduced in the appropriate context.

Findings

The study asked police officers questions requiring them to explain their experiences with social undermining throughout their careers. The responses of the police officers helped to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. Do police officers experience social undermining?

RQ2. How does undermining affect police officers?

RQ3. How do police officers address undermining?

RQ4. How do police officers believe police organizations should address undermining?

The questions in the interview were broad and exploratory. The researcher wrote the questions so that the participants could openly share their experiences. Follow-up questions were then asked to focus on particular elements of a story or experience and to obtain as much relevant information as possible. In addition, other questions were asked in an attempt to address the remaining research questions.
In Table 1, the participant's demographics are presented. The demographics obtained are pseudonym names, age, tenure, rank, educational attainment, location of work within the United States, estimated department size, sex, and race. The average age was 47 years old. The average tenure among the sample was 23 years. All participants were in leadership positions ranging from sergeant to chief. The officers, on average, had some form of higher education. Most of the sample was located in the southern United States. For department size, officers came from a variety of departments ranging from seventeen to around 4,000. The participants were all Male; most were White, with one Non-White based on the perception of the interviewer.

**Research Question 1**

RQ1: Do police officers experience social undermining?
Throughout the interviewing process, it became exceedingly clear that officers were eager to meet to discuss this topic. Social undermining was an important topic for these officers, and all participants experienced some form of undermining. In the interviews, every officer related a personal experience of being undermined or witnessed someone else being undermined. In many cases, officers had personally been victims and had witnessed others in their department fall victim. The officers were forthcoming with their experiences and how those undermining experiences impacted them. When reexamining the transcripts, it became apparent that there were many ways officers felt they had been undermined.

Every experience of social undermining occurred in a variety of places and was carried out in different ways. Using thematic analysis, the researcher extracted themes from the interviews using an inductive and deductive coding process. These major themes will be discussed. The themes most consistently brought forward related to social undermining were sabotage, careers, and frequency. Officers expressed that people sabotaged others, did it for career advancement or to harm another's career, and that undermining was frequent in policing. Many of the experiences intertwined and related significantly. However, not all told the same story and provided insight into social undermining in policing. The first theme is that of sabotage. Sabotage is the deliberate and intentional act to prevent success in something (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). As social undermining is the intentional act to hinder, sabotage may be used as a way to accomplish such a task.
Sabotage

Police work requires substantial teamwork and trust with other officers. With the demands of police work, officers are expected to rely on each other to accomplish their duties. If social undermining occurs, it can lead to a breakdown of trust towards others (Khan et al., 2022). If a breakdown of trust occurs among employees, then the entire organization may be negatively affected.

In the study, participants expressed concerns over being sabotaged by coworkers. Larry explained that at one time, he took a leave of absence from his policing job to attend the Southern Police Institute. This extra training at the Institute lasted several months. Because he was gone, he believed this provided an opportunity for his coworkers to try to push him out of the department. Larry's suspicions were confirmed when he received a call from his department. He explained:

I oversee our drone program in the Police Department, and just last week, I got a phone call from [Lewis], who was my field training officer when I got hired. We're now both equal rank at Sergeant, saying, “Hey, I'm taking it over from you.” This just came out of the blue, out of nowhere, no communication. Surprised by the lack of information about such a drastic change, Larry explained that being away from the department made him feel like he lacked relevancy, and as such, coworkers were using that against him to sabotage him by taking away responsibilities that he had worked to obtain.

Larry shared an additional experience. He said that he can trust his fellow officers in any police situation. However, some coworkers do little things that can wear an officer down. Larry said:

If I asked... “Hey, here's my letter for promotion. Do you mind proofreading? Let me know what you think?” They wouldn’t give me an honest answer if they thought it was good. They wouldn't go, “Hey, you could improve it by doing this or this.” There's very few people in the department I trust with that.
Larry suggests that within police departments, it is rare for officers to assist each other with minor things related to advancement in their individual careers. These forms of undermining can have an impact on a victim’s career. Larry said:

> It can definitely stifle your career. Trap you in a certain position and not get promoted, even if that's your ambition, and you work hard to try to get it. And it can definitely make people very disgruntled and angry. Especially when they are at that Sergeant level, and they oversee a team of officers. If they're disgruntled, they're going to impart that on their officers, who are going to go out and impart that on the citizens. And that's when bad decisions are made. It can really tear down a whole agency.

Dylan shared a similar sentiment. In a leadership position, Dylan witnessed correctional officers talking poorly about a coworker who was applying for a police officer position. They did not have any proof regarding the accusations they were making against that officer. Dylan noted that because of these statements, it “hurt his ability to further his career.” Kevin additionally felt that when he was overlooked for a promotion due to not being friends with the right people, his entire career was derailed. It set him back significantly.

In another example, Skip explained that early in his career, he dealt with a call where a wanted man had run into a home. The officers on scene did not pursue the man into the home due to policy and legal concerns. However, Skip articulated to a supervisor that this was an exigent circumstance that required immediate action; therefore, it did not require a warrant. The supervisor gave permission to enter the home, and the suspect was apprehended. Skip then said:

> The guy that used to be my FTO goes behind my back and tells the supervisor that I told him that all I had to do was plant the seed, and he would agree to give access to the house. So, basically insinuating that I was giving him false information so I could pursue this guy inside the house. Skip felt like this undermining action was done to “slow me down in my advancement.”

Skip would later talk to that supervisor, who told him that ever since that seed of doubt
was planted by the undermining FTO, it was “in the back of my mind every time I needed to make a decision on something you were involved in.”

In a different interview, Brandon shared his experience of being undermined. Brandon was a Lieutenant in his agency. The department had geographic patrol areas for the city, each with its own commander — a Lieutenant. When a new chief was appointed, the zones were consolidated into six. As a consequence, two of the zone commanders were demoted and placed elsewhere in the department. Brandon said:

One of my coworkers, I found out later, actively shanked me by bad-mouthing me to the new chief that I wasn't doing anything and stuff like that. So therefore, when the consolidation happened, I ended up getting bumped out, and I got put on to third shift as a watch commander, and that angered me. And...that was all based on another Lieutenant who did not want to get bumped. For Brandon, this sabotage from his coworker altered his entire career and impacted him significantly.

In a different instance, Brandon also witnessed undermining in his department. Two sergeants who shared an office often fought over overtime hours as it significantly increased their pay. Eventually, one of the sergeants searched the other sergeant’s desk and found compromising photos. The sergeant then mailed those photos to the other sergeant’s wife. This act of sabotage led to the department firing the underminer. The sergeant, who was undermined, experienced several consequences in his personal life.

Curtis explained one experience where a subordinate went around his back to make him look bad. When he was a sergeant over K-9, the department hired several new officers, one of whom expressed his desire to be a dog handler. Curtis would eventually discover that:

Over a period of a couple of years...[the officer] was sort of systematically trying to undermine me so that he could turn into the Sergeant [over K-9]...He did a number of things like telling canine guys from other agencies that I was friends
and training partners with that I was talking about them in classes and things like that, which is just not at all true. Without realizing the damage that was being done, Curtis later found out that a close friend and mentor consequently contacted his chief about these rumors. Although untrue, the damage had already been done. Curtis would go on to say this was only one of a few examples of this specific officer trying to sabotage him to push him out and possibly open the position.

Similarly, Curtis recalled an experience where his chief was a reserve military officer. At one point, the chief was called to active duty and was deployed overseas. Although gone, the chief was expected to return, and a captain was appointed as acting chief. However, on the chief’s second deployment, the captain attempted to sway the mayor to fire the chief while he was away. The attempt almost worked. The mayor called a city council meeting to vote the deployed chief out, but it was stopped due to the legal protections afforded by the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act.

Devin experienced a problematic officer who sought to sabotage and undermine anyone who got in his way. The problematic officer was creating a variety of issues in the department that Devin served in for many years. As a field training officer, the troublesome officer was convincing leadership that a new officer was not meeting expectations. Devin recalls:

He undermined that recruit to the point where he was forced to resign. And we say to this day that kid would have made it on field training if it wasn’t for him because all he did was undermine him and make him look bad to the point where people upstairs were convinced that this kid was terrible, and he wasn’t. And some people went to bat for the kid, but this guy’s voice was stronger, and this kid lost his job because of it.
Later, the undermining officer, who was now a lieutenant, eventually resigned and retired after attempting to be promoted to the deputy chief’s position; however, many of the department officers complained about this. Devin explained that the undermining had not stopped, though. Into retirement, the lieutenant is still reaching out to department members to try to influence their decision-making process related to promotions.

In a more extreme example, Merton shared his story of accepting a new chief position in a different town. Before he arrived in the town, a certain sergeant was appointed deputy chief by the city manager. The sergeant was very good friends with the city manager. It was discovered that the city manager had purposefully overlooked and undermined many other deserving police officers for the position of deputy chief to place his good friend in that position. Merton would later find additional proof that the city manager and his friend, the deputy chief, were conspiring to place the deputy chief into the chief position. In the end, due to legislation, the town had to bring in an outside person to fill the position of chief. That outside person was Merton. Merton said:

But when it comes to backstabbing, to me, that was pretty bad because they already had intentions of bringing me up there, and I bought a house and all this other stuff. And they never intended on keeping me more than [one] or two years. It was later learned that this city manager also attempted to sabotage Merton by calling the state police academy and seeing if Merton’s police certification could be pulled from him. Merton knew the administrators of the state’s certification program as he had graduated with him and were his friends. That is how Merton found out his new employer was trying to sabotage him. They warned him about the city manager's actions.

Merton, the oldest officer in the sample and a very experienced officer, explained:

I've had backstabbing on me before. What you're finding is…we eat our young in the police profession. So, it's usually the people that are newer to the job that are getting backstabbed by the people that have been there for a while.
It is suggested that more tenured officers tend to undermine the younger officers. It could be theorized that a fear of replacement could intimidate the more tenured officers. Undermining and sabotaging the new officers may make those engaged in the behavior feel like they are securing their jobs and future promotions. Undermining behaviors from supervisors may also be viewed as a form of hazing of the new officers.

Sorty shared an experience where he felt that a coworker was intentionally sabotaging a sergeant. When Sorty was a detective, all the detectives were assigned a supervising sergeant. To all those within the unit, this sergeant was not viewed as a very good supervisor. A senior detective talked to each of the detectives under this sergeant and began concocting a work strike that would ultimately reduce the unit’s performance in defiance. Sorty said the senior detective told the detectives, “We’re going to make him look bad. They’ll move him.” Sorty argued that doing so would make each officer look bad, but those conspiring disagreed. Sorty believed that the sergeant in question was somewhat problematic. But he also believed that this work strike would undermine the command structure. This particular experience occurred early in his career. He said work strikes were a “very common tactic” in his department.

Finally, Teddy shared a significant form of sabotage and undermining within his own department. During his tenure at his department, they cycled through several upper command personnel. One of these upper command personnel or directors was unique in that he was laxer than his predecessor. Teddy and his colleagues were optimistic about this change. However, the director seemed unhappy with the department's progress. This new director started talking poorly about shifts and the shift officers to others. Teddy said:
He ended up using each shift against each other, each squad against each other because if he wasn't getting what he wanted, he was trying to figure out how to motivate people. So, he was playing each shift against each other, each supervisor against each other. The director attempted to motivate the department by pitting the different shifts against each other. He would do this by revealing details or starting rumors about the different shifts. Although thinking it was motivating the department to have internal competition among the shifts, Teddy and other officers saw it as a form of sabotage for the entire department.

Sabotage was a repeated theme in how officers perceived undermining to occur. Many officers in the study believe they were a target of sabotage from coworkers. When sabotaged, officers targeted reputations, work success, and even their job. In addition to sabotage, participants experienced undermining targeted at their careers.

**Careers**

Although sabotage may target one’s career, it is not always the case. As such, officers frequently believed undermining occurred to the benefit of the underminer's career or as a detriment to the target. As officers navigate through their careers, it is no surprise that they seek to advance in the department. Advancing in one’s career can bring higher pay, an increase in future pension payment amounts, and different responsibilities, which can promote new growth and new talents. It is common for police officers to try to move away from patrol work by means of promotion because patrol work is often seen as a more stressful and dangerous job. Because of this, an officer can become a target for those who seek to undermine them for personal gain and to obtain a higher position in the department. The study's definition of social undermining states that it is used to prevent
another’s work success. As expected, participants frequently brought up how careers were targeted with social undermining.

Larry noticed a significant increase in undermining behavior when he, as a young officer, was promoted to a leadership position. Although he did not cite any particular experiences of public undermining, he did say:

A lot of petty things and gossip in the background to try to undermine you in that manner. Like somebody wants to corrupt your file on a PowerPoint, so when you give a presentation to the chief, you look incompetent. But it's going to be, they'll find out what you're working on, take your idea, and then beat you to it. These examples of undermining impact an officer’s career either directly or indirectly.

These tactics are subtle and may be hard to track or to determine the source. Other times, it can be clear who the underminer is.

Within their department, Skip experienced significant undermining that targeted his career. During a call involving a drunk male who was threatening his neighbors, Skip acquired the necessary information to prove probable cause to arrest the suspect. Skip relayed this information over the radio to his supervisor and was given permission to go and make the arrest. Meanwhile, every morning, a certain traffic sergeant would clock in, turn his radio off, and then get coffee. After Skip executed this arrest warrant, higher command called the traffic sergeant away from his relaxing morning routine to transfer the suspect to the jail. This annoyed the sergeant. Skip came in the next night and found out that the traffic sergeant had made attempts to undermine him.

Apparently, this guy had went back and typed up a memo to the…Operations Bureau commander, which is all of our boss, saying that I fabricated information to force entry in there so I could arrest that guy. And that my fabrication of information could have resulted in me having to use deadly force against the guy. That starts an internal. And it was unfounded. The traffic sergeant, upset with being called away from his morning routine for a call, sought to undermine Skip. The memo sent to higher command forced an internal
investigation of Skip and the incident. This could have discredited Skip and caused an unjust punishment to be inflicted upon him. In the end, the internal investigation found no evidence of misconduct, and Skip was cleared. However, the damage had been done, and Skip experienced additional stress and was believed to be less productive during this time, negatively impacting his career.

Landon experienced a similar form of social undermining that led to an investigation. In the department, there were two detectives. Landon was assigned as one detective, and a female coworker was assigned as the other. The two detectives did not get along due to their different styles of detective work. Landon tried to build a friendship with the female detective, but his efforts were often ignored. In one such attempt, Landon tried to connect with her by discussing a mutual interest in nature and birdwatching. In the days to follow, Landon was unexpectedly called into the chief’s office. Apparently, a workplace harassment claim had been filed against him by the female detective. According to the complaint, the female detective felt harassed whenever Landon tried to build a friendship and talk with her. Due to the filed harassment claim, an outside investigation was required to examine the allegation. Although he claimed to not experience additional stress, Landon was extremely angry and had a negative view of life. This could have cost Landon his job, but no legitimacy was found regarding the claim, and he was exonerated.

Skip shared a different undermining event involving his department’s chief and assistant chief. Skip explained:

He's a great chief. Been there for a while. He has an assistant chief who wants the Chief’s position. This particular chief, due to some life choices he's made, can no longer retire when he could because his ex-wife is getting half of his pension. So now he's going to be around longer. So, this assistant chief can no longer get in
that Chief’s position that he wants. That assistant chief is going behind the Chief’s back and bad-mouthing the chief to all the line officers, all the supervisors, and even the City Council. The assistant chief was actively trying to get anyone involved to turn on the chief. The goal of the assistant chief was to get enough leverage, ideally from the city council, to remove the current chief so he could replace him. The chief was not aware of this behavior going on behind his back. Skip concluded that the chief was most likely going to lose his job as a result. If Skip’s assumption proves true, it will be a devastating blow to the chief’s career.

When discussing undermining and its effects on one’s career, Brandon experienced, on two different occasions, the concept that knowing and being allied with the right people really does matter. Brandon explained that being a disciple or a follower of someone is when there is a “high-ranking person, or you have a person of rank who identifies people that they want to bring up with them. And then they go about taking care of them each step of the way.” The follower is taken care of by being promoted or given special assignments within the department. Brandon then asked:

What are they paying? What are they giving to him for that advancement? There's something there. But you don't really know what it is. And like I said, I saw that happen twice with people...So when you talk about undermining and backstabbing if you're not in that group of disciples, how is that having a negative impact on your career by that person doing that and... that happens all the time. Brandon argued that when a high-ranking officer brings only certain, selected people up the ranks with them, that action will consequently impact the careers of others left behind. Brandon saw this as a form of social undermining as it negatively impacted many people in the department.

Social undermining can be used to target an individual’s career directly. Quinton shared his perspective on how careers may be impacted by the undermining of others:
We've had instances where you've had people undermine others in reference to supervisors and them not wanting to mentor people to where they could progress further in their careers. And the supervisor would sit there and talk bad about them or say something and say bad things about them. And that's where we get passed over for promotion or what have you. That seems to be one of the most common aspects of any type of backstabbing.

It is inferred that officers with more seniority are intentionally undermines others to minimize competition. They believe that if they bad-mouth a new officer or disrupt their professional progress, then they can eliminate a threat to their own job and possible future advancement.

In a personal experience, Quinton received a call from a sergeant and was asked a question. After talking to the sergeant, he hung up and went about his day. The next morning, Quinton was called into a different sergeant’s office, and he was asked why he had not gone to the scene of the sergeant who had called him the day before. Quinton explained that the sergeant did not request for him to come and was only asked a question over the phone. Quinton explained:

This other sergeant sits here and writes a statement saying that I said that I was too far out of the city to respond to the call when I actually lived in the city, sitting in my chair at the time. So, it's false statements that were made, and these two particular supervisors, and they still do, have a tendency to make those statements to bolster their credibility on being able to justify the punishment that they're getting handed down. And if they don't like you, then they try to ruin your career. Each officer may have their own motives regarding undermining. To Quinton, the infraction given by the sergeant was built on a blatant lie that targeted him. This infraction would negatively impact his career and stunt his progress within the ranks of the organization. To further complicate the matter, these same sergeants are still responsible for him and supervise him.

The social undermining of officers’ careers can be very direct, but it is typically more common to be undermined in secret. Clinton shared a personal experience of when
he was a young deputy. Being honest, he admitted that he was an aggressive new officer ready to react harshly on crime. Consequently, his lieutenant wrote a negative letter focusing on all the problems he saw in Clinton. Clinton discovered this fact later. He was then transferred to a different district. However, the lieutenant did not stop at this letter. Clinton reflected on just how far this lieutenant was willing to go, “This Lieutenant drove forty minutes out of his way to another district to give [a letter] to the command of that district. And I saw him walk out and do it.” Passing along observed performance issues from a supervisor to a new supervisor is a common management tactic when officers transfer. However, to Clinton, this lieutenant was going out of his way to undermine him and negatively affect his career in the new department. To this day, Clinton reflects on that Lieutenant and his actions, which occurred over eight years ago.

As an investigator, Bently was assigned to a joint task force for narcotics. In this position, Bently felt like he was doing his job effectively. However, one day, he and another investigator were called into the chief’s office and told that drug crimes were up and that they were not doing their job effectively. Consequently, Bently was sent back to the road. Bently and the other investigator confronted their sergeant about this matter, and he “acted like he didn't know anything about it. He stormed out of the office like he was going to go do something about it.” Bently soon found out that the new chief, major, and captain were all threatening the narcotics sergeant with the loss of his job, so the sergeant directed the blame onto the two investigators, directly impacting their careers. Consequently, both sergeants were removed as detectives and placed back on the road. This came with a rigid schedule, a pay cut, and left negative feelings between the leadership and Bently.
In this instance, the trickle-down effect started at the top of the chain of command. Bently was demoted and undermined by his supervisor, who was also being undermined by his chief. A new chief was appointed, and many negative changes began to occur in the department. As discussed previously, some new leaders come in with the intent to bring their disciples up the ranks with them. In Bently’s department, the new chief brought in many of his close confidants. With the chief surrounded by these allies, Bently witnessed the effects of social undermining. Careers were impacted as the chief would demote and punish officers, creating a rift between him and other personnel outside his circle of confidants. Bently recalled the source of the rift being “typical politics stuff,” where the chief may have heard different rumors from different sources. As a result, the chief targeted certain individuals who he felt were speaking out against him. Bently said:

My supervisor was one of those individuals…He had put that off on us to save his own skin…That's where it all stemmed from…They used the term “problems,” as far as drug problems and everything, as a reason to kind of go that route. But in reality, it had nothing to do with that. It was simply just a vendetta thing, and then to save his own behind.

At a time when Bently felt like he was doing extremely well in his position, his supervisor reacted to the chief's undermining by undermining his own subordinates. Consequently, the careers of two investigators were taken away, and both were placed back on the road, which is typically a less desirable job.

Early in Kevin’s career, he applied for a job in a narcotics task force with two openings. Kevin knew that two other officers with no experience in narcotics had also applied for the job. Although he did not have any narcotics experience himself, Kevin believed he was better qualified because he had recently received two department awards and had proved his work ethic to his superiors. However, Kevin felt undermined by the
chief when he found out that the other two officers had been hired for the task force. Kevin said, “It really set back my career.” After this experience, Kevin said, “That showed me that you got to know people [to progress through the ranks]. You should be able to get somewhere on your merit. Unfortunately, that's not done all the time.” Social undermining can be subjective, and Kevin felt like he had been undermined.

Later in his career, at the time of the interview, Kevin experienced a direct form of undermining by a coworker of the same rank when seeking to be promoted to a major in the department. The coworker who was applying for this same position went to the assistant chief and accused Kevin of providing some false information on his application for the promotion. This led the assistant chief to reach out to Kevin to make sure he had verified all his information. Kevin did so, and all the information was correct. Kevin said:

I end up being vindicated. But it ended up bothering me...But I think she was playing a long game, and I could be wrong, but I think she looked at me as direct competition to her achieving her next goal. The perceived goal of this coworker was to make her competition look dishonest and deceitful, therefore making her look better for the promotion.

When talking to Sorty about his experiences, he shared the importance of information sharing in departments. Police officers have many different responsibilities in a department. Oftentimes, these responsibilities are taught to them by their coworkers. However, many times, Sorty experienced a lack of help and a lack of knowledge sharing among officers.

Let's say the person struggles with reports. They're not going to help him with those reports. If they're struggling with undercover stuff...They're not going to mentor that person. They're not going to try to help them be better. They're going to basically let that person fail. Sorty further clarified that if the person asking for assistance was part of the in-group and meshed well with whoever had the needed information, then the help and information
were given freely. When someone was liked and accepted by some group within the department, the group would do everything they could to provide that person with the tools to succeed. This example of undermining can hinder one’s career in policing.

When hired as the police chief in a new department, Merton witnessed odd undermining behaviors carried out by his assigned deputy chief. On his first day at work, he learned about an incident that had happened the day before. The recently appointed deputy chief had intentionally targeted a talented lieutenant in the department. He demoted him. Merton explained:

He made the Lieutenant pack his stuff up out of his office, take all of his stuff home, and then he took his car away…He took his car away, and he gave him the worst car that they had in the outfit…so he degrades this guy in front of everybody. Makes him walk out of the building with this box of all of his stuff. The deputy chief’s behavior was targeted and malicious and involved intentional humiliation with the purpose of negatively impacting the career of that officer. Merton found out later that this officer was hated by the city manager—the same city manager who had appointed this deputy chief. A variety of undermining was going on within this small department. In the end, Merton was fired so that this city manager could appoint the deputy chief, who was his good friend, to the position of chief.

Career advancement is crucial for police officers to improve their positions, salaries, and retirement. With a chain of command structure, it makes the ability to advance higher into the ranks competitive. As a result, it should be no surprise that some officers want to target someone and negatively impact their career. An underminer may seek to harm the reputation of others they see as competition or a threat to their future success.
Frequency

When trying to understand whether social undermining occurs within police departments, the participants' experiences made it clear that they perceive it occurs frequently. Not only are officers experiencing stress from the responsibilities that fall on their shoulders, but they also feel they must constantly manage the environment within police departments.

When interviewing Larry, he made it clear that social undermining occurred regularly. Larry was the lowest-tenured officer in the sample, yet he still understood the commonality of undermining in police departments.

My goodness, gracious…I've never seen anything like backstabbing, where somebody will not put bullets in somebody else’s gun or hope they get hurt or something along those lines. But a lot of just petty little things that really wear you down after a while.

When explaining the problem of social undermining, Larry seemed defeated and exhausted. This theme continued throughout the interviews. When Skip was asked to share experiences relating to social undermining, he immediately asked, “How many examples do you want? I could give you a ton.” Skip had a unique perspective on undermining and how it occurs in police departments. When working in narcotics in his city, he had the opportunity to work with every agency in the area. These agencies were local, county, and federal. Skip explained:

It happens in every department...It's in every level of law enforcement, and it's kind of interesting. It gives you a new perspective, being a third party on the outside, kind of looking in, but still close enough to get everything. Yeah, it happens everywhere. It kind of makes you feel better that it happens everywhere, honestly. It's not just your agency.

This social undermining stemmed from cliques within the departments. Skip explained, “You have that one clique that has an issue and is doing the undermining. Everybody else will be completely fine, but you'll have that one clique.” In Skip's experience, a particular
group or clique within a department can be identified as the root cause of frequent social undermining. The theme of cliques is repeated as frequently undermining.

Quinton stated that social undermining occurs more frequently among supervisors and their subordinates. He observed:

Supervisors not wanting to mentor [subordinates] so they couldn’t progress further in their careers. And they would sit there and stop and talk bad about them or say something and say bad things about them...That seems to be one of the most common aspects of any type of backstabbing.

Like Quinton’s theory, Devin experienced something similar with a particular officer in his department. Devin was a unique police officer because he was much older and had previously worked in a different career. Unfortunately, Devin had a field training officer who constantly sought to undermine him. As Devin explained:

Day one, my training officer, who turned out to be the organizational terrorist of the police department my entire career, I just didn't get along with. He didn't want to get along with me. So, he really started that day undermining me from the training portion.

When a captain asked a responsible field training officer if Devin was ready, he replied in the positive. However, Devin said, “My main field training officer went up and said, ‘this guy's not ready, not even close.’” To Devin, this undermining started right when he began the career. The undermining field training officer continues to train new officers and often gets word of similar undermining behaviors from the new officers.

Clinton discussed his experience in a particular promotional process. During the process, several people approached him, saying that others within the department were hoping he failed so that their friend could get the job. Clinton explained, “It’s everywhere. Especially in law enforcement.” Social undermining occurs over time and frequently. From Clinton’s perspective, it is a common and reoccurring problem in all of law enforcement.
Bently added to this argument noting that most social undermining occurs in a more minor way. He was not able to think of a specific undermining event that impacted him directly, but he did explain that it happens frequently. Bently said, “There's a lot of instances… little stuff. There's always little things behind the scenes. Promotions come up, new equipment. There's always little things going on as far as undermining. It always happens. It's a commonplace thing.” As police officers work throughout their careers, they perceive the commonality of social undermining. In many cases, it was perceived as unavoidable. If you are seeking a promotion, you may become a target by another officer seeking to eliminate the competition.

Dylan suggested that Sheriff’s departments may be subject to more instances of undermining due to their political nature. Sheriffs are elected every four years. Consequently, politics plays a prominent role in the department. Dylan explained what occurs within the department, “There’s… positioning going on and people saying things about other people because they want their candidate to be the one that’s the front runner for being the sheriff when a few years down the road happens.”

As political jockeying occurs behind the scenes, fellow officers often become targets. The department will inevitably change over time. Many officers will come in and then leave the department. “When someone leaves the agency, instead of somebody finding out why they left, there's like rumors of, it's poor leadership, and it's this, and it's that because they're trying to set that up,” Dylan said. Officers are constantly seeking to undermine other officers to try to eliminate the competition for future promotions within the agency. In sheriff departments, it is perceived as a long-term political strategy to determine a winning side and thus reap the benefits of being on that team.
In his career, Teddy worked with a supervisor who would frequently undermine his subordinates. This supervisor would constantly approach an officer, compliment them, and build their confidence. However, he would never provide feedback to the officers if something was not done properly. Instead, this supervisor would give compliments, then go to his supervisor and point out all the mistakes the officers made. Teddy explained:

His way of handling things was you do it my way, or you get written up. There was no verbal counseling. There was no training. There was no guidance. But every time he would walk up to an officer, he'd be like, “Hey, you're doing a great job. You just made a few mistakes.” But then when he would go into the meetings with us and stuff, he'd be like, “I want them written up. They're useless. They're idiots.”

The supervisor’s undermining behavior was constantly directed at anyone he saw as problematic. Instead of providing feedback to help officers improve, the supervisor complained about them to the staff behind their backs and disciplined them. Being blindsided by being told they were doing well, yet later being punished for the behavior was bad leadership, and officers felt undermined.

Based on the study, police officers believe social undermining occurs frequently. The frequency of undermining occurs from the beginning of the career. Some officers experience a frequent amount of undermining in their careers. It was also suggested that supervisors are responsible for more undermining, according to some officers.

**Summary of RQ1**

These stories and experiences from the sample of police officers show that they believe social undermining is occurring. Every participant in the study had a personal knowledge of undermining. Most officers had either been a victim or had seen undermining occur within their own department. Officers experienced sabotage that targeted their reputation, their positions, and, at times, their personal lives. In several
instances, social undermining led to negative career outcomes. Undermining caused demotions, internal investigations, and general attempts to make other officers look unqualified for the job. Officers also expressed the frequency with which undermining occurs within departments. Officers explained a constant barrage of small and large undermining events that occur at all levels of law enforcement. With the various experiences shared, it can be said that police officers strongly believe social undermining exists within policing.

**Research Question 2**

RQ2. How does undermining affect police officers?

Social undermining impacts both workers and organizations (Vinokur & van Ryn, 1993; Duffy et al., 2002; Song & Zhao, 2022). The problems caused by social undermining are vast and cover two areas of concern. The first focuses on individual well-being, which examines emotional and physical health (Sabeen & Arshad, 2019). The second consequence of social undermining explores work-related outcomes. Work-related outcomes are typically measurable results and encapsulate commitment to their work, lower levels of contribution to the organization, reduced work quality, lower collaboration with others within an organization, and lower morale.

In the interviews, officers shared their experiences of being socially undermined throughout their policing careers. By the end of the interviews, officers shared how they were affected by their undermining experiences. The effects of social undermining ranged significantly depending on the specific experience and the officer. A single experience could also affect an officer in multiple ways. This section aims to answer the second research question, “How does undermining affect police officers?”
To answer the question, this section will be broken up into two parts. The two focal areas of study affected by social undermining are: well-being and work-related outcomes. Well-being examines personal outcomes such as emotional and physical health. The other outcome is that of the workplace which examine reduced work quality, minimal contribution to the department, job withdrawal, collaboration among employees, and morale. These two areas examine officer and organizational impacts (Sabeen & Arshad, 2019).

**Well-being Outcomes**

**Emotional Health.** Emotional health is the ability to cope with one’s emotions and handle life’s events. Emotional health is typically correlated with feelings of anxiety, depression, and reduced quality of life (Duffy, 1998). Emotional health has been found to be negatively and significantly affected by social undermining (Duffy, 1998; Sabeen & Arshad, 2019). As a result, this research sought to examine how perceived instances of social undermining impacted officer emotional health.

When asked how his undermining experience affected his mental and emotional health, Larry said, “Yeah, it's kind of always feeling like I was on guard, and…I can't make a mistake because everybody's looking at me.” He also shared how he felt anxious about his job while he spent time at the Southern Police Institute. Larry explained that because he was out of the loop on what was happening at his department while he was gone for three months, he feared being replaced or removed from his position. Larry feared this so much that he explained that he brought his work laptop with him and would check on reports and calls to maintain a connection during his absence.
Bently explained the cumulative effect of frequent but minor instances of undermining, such as promotion time and when new equipment is available. These take a toll on officers. “That’s a lot to carry around after 18 years.” It is not an easy thing to be subjected to these types of undermining behaviors and still go out and do the job. This can be mentally draining and can lead to decreased mental health. Larry would continue in this vein by stating, “Some days the hardest part of the job is not dealing with the citizens; it's dealing with people within your own department.” The petty things that officers do to each other are mentally taxing. Larry suggests that the movements and reassignments that occur within departments “really messes with your life and your sleep schedule,” and it breeds hostility within the organization.

After losing his zone commander position, Brandon’s quality of life drastically changed. His pay was decreased. He was given a rigid shift schedule. He had his responsibilities changed. And he was no longer able to take a work car home. Due to being undermined by a coworker, Brandon harbored a “smoldering anger that wouldn’t go away.” Brandon said:

It was unhealthy, and I recognized it…I was infuriated, and that was the only time in my career at any point where I was angry every single day, and it lasted for a month. I'd see my coworker and want to punch him in the mouth, but I never did…It had a huge impact on my life.

Brandon was not the only one who felt anger when undermined. Several officers expressed that being a victim of social undermining led to feelings of anger. Kevin expressed feelings of depression but was ultimately “very angry” when accused of not calculating his workplace statistics correctly by another officer seeking the same promotion as Kevin.
Bently explained that various forms of emotional health concerns occur when undermined. Bently was undermined by his supervisor, who was also a friend. Bently reported feeling stress and depression and noted a significant negative impact on his quality of life. However, what he expressed most during this time was feelings of anger. He said, “I was more angry than anything,” that a friend would betray him and cause him to be punished. Landon also felt extraordinarily angry when accused of harassment by a fellow detective. Landon said, “I was extremely angry…I really wasn't a big fan of women at that time. Because of that, I really had a negative view on life.” The anger seeped into his life and impacted his happiness as well. For these officers, the anger they experienced was prolonged and made a significant impact on their emotional health.

Social undermining also caused stress for many officers who fell victim to it. Curtis had a subordinate make derogatory statements to the K9 officer who had trained him. This officer worked in a neighboring department. Curtis experienced high levels of stress upon finding this out. Although it occurred early in his career, Curtis explained that he was never able to clarify and clear the air with that officer. “I still worry about it,” Curtis explained. He said:

They were everything I knew about leadership…So it was a big deal for me. I was very young, and…they were a big deal for me in terms of role models and leadership, so yeah, it affected me…I stressed about it a lot. The theme of emotional health can be very long-lasting. The prolonged stress that Curtis experienced, even decades later, shows the significance undermining can have on an officer and their emotional health.

Due to the fear of being undermined by coworkers, the desire to avoid going into the office is a dramatic realization. Teddy shared a similar sentiment when asked if he felt a greater level of stress and anxiety when undermined. He responded by saying,
“Absolutely. It carried over into family life, carried over into relationships, to the point that I just wanted to stay on nights because there was less chance of running into the political aspect during the days.” Although working an evening shift significantly impacted his family life, Teddy preferred it to avoid the undermining behaviors going on within his department.

At times, undermining can be emotionally overwhelming. When Devin became a police officer, he had completed a career in the military. Feeling like policing was a good direction, he sought to join his department at the age of thirty-six. When trying to befriend fellow officers within his new department, he was immediately met with unwelcoming officers who actively talked bad about him. Devin reflected on this point in his life, “I actually cried in field training. A 36-year-old male with a family, going home sitting on the couch, crying like, what am I doing? This is the job. Is this the right job for me?” Devin struggled during the three-month-long field training process due to the resistance he experienced from those within his department. He said, “That's probably one of the most stressful three months of my entire career.” The stress brought on by such problematic behavior from coworkers not only emotionally strained Devin, but almost caused him to reconsider his choice to become a police officer. In an era where it is challenging enough to hire and retain qualified officers, the stress caused by undermining can be detrimental to the future of policing. Although substantial resources are being expended to hire new recruits to fill their ranks, if being undermined upon hire, may leave the organization exacerbating the problems.

When Merton took on the new chief position, only to be undermined by the city manager and deputy chief, he experienced negative emotional health outcomes. Upon
learning of their plot to get him fired after only being there for a few months, Merton felt completely defeated.

I felt very depressed. Felt run down. I felt like I was going to lose everything that I had just gained. My house was going to go away. I could lose my family, my job. [Also] if you get fired as a chief, getting another chief job is not the easiest thing in the world…I didn't know if my reputation was going to be able to sustain this.

Merton felt emotionally drained as he worried that his new job might be taken away from him. He said, “It takes a toll, mentally and physically.” With the severity of the situation, he and his wife even filed for bankruptcy as they feared losing their job. The undermining that Merton was experiencing became a problem that permeated his family life as well. This ruined their credit and ultimately added to the emotional strain they were experiencing at that time.

Subjects reported that exposure to social undermining causes anxiety, stress, depression, and reduced quality of life. Being victimized and targeted by those who intend to hurt you and your reputation can be overwhelming to an officer, especially in a field where one’s reputation may be the most important thing to make advancement through their field. This kind of abuse can have long-term negative ramifications on an officer and can lead to many emotional health concerns.

Physical Health. Several subjects reported that social undermining impacted their physical health. Merton experienced a significant undermining event that almost cost him his job. For Merton, it was significant to move away from his prior department, buy a new home in a new town, and take a new position as a chief. When the city manager targeted him and tried to fire him upon his arrival to this new department, Merton’s physical health was significantly impacted. Merton said:
It put me in the hospital. I was in the hospital for two weeks with intestinal problems. Because I was so tense and worried about it…It was like, holy cow, you want to talk about taking a toll on me?

During his brief tenure as the new chief, Merton experienced such intentional and prolonged forms of undermining that it caused physical problems to his health. The amount of strain Merton endured during this period was evident. He constantly had to handle the behavior of his Deputy Chief, who was seeking to undermine him along with the city manager, while also maintaining a police department. As a result, Merton was hospitalized.

Merton reflected on his experience and shared insight from his tenure as a police officer. He believes that officers build metaphorical walls throughout their careers. These walls are made to protect the officer from the constant strain of the job and from the various forms of undermining that occur within police departments. These walls can also be used to hold in thoughts and feelings to maintain the status quo and avoid social conflict for an officer. Consequently, Merton believes that upon retirement, “You got nowhere for it to go. It destroys you from the inside from the years that you're in doing this job.” The prolonged damage caused by undermining can negatively impact an officer beyond their career.

Brandon was undermined by a coworker who convinced the chief to remove Brandon as a zone commander. Brandon expressed the amount of anger he felt during this time. It completely changed his life, and he was not sure how to handle it. Brandon considered physically fighting the undermining coworker to get payback; however, instead, he got a membership to a gym and exercised to cope with his pent-up rage. Although the event caused emotional health problems, Brandon reflected that the amount of time he spent in the gym really helped improve his physical health at that time.
Similar to Brandon, Quinton expressed how the result of social undermining positively impacted his physical health. After being removed from his crime scene investigation position due to a supervisor who had undermined him, the stress from all the cases he was working on was removed. It felt like “a weight that was lifted off me.”

Quinton said:

I found out that I had high blood pressure, so I was able to get back to the gym and start working out, and I actually lowered my blood pressure…I probably would have ended up with a heart attack if I would have stayed in CSI. So, did I find more stress and all that? No, I got relief to be honest with you. Although undermining was a stressful event to Quinton, he responded to this by engaging in pro-social activities to cope. Even though undermining usually produces negative effects on one’s life, occasionally, it can produce a positive effect, too. After being removed from CSI, Quinton found emotional and mental relief that led to positive physical changes in his health.

Some officers experienced negative physical consequences due to undermining. In one instance, Merton required hospitalization due to the consequences of undermining. Interestingly, although social undermining was a negative experience, some officers found pro-social ways to cope. Consequently, some officers saw improvements in their health as they utilized exercise to deal with the undermining.

**Work-related Outcomes**

Work-related outcomes are often measurable. Social undermining can negatively impact work-related outcomes by weakening the commitment to the job, causing lower contributions, and reducing the quality of the work (Mulaphong, 2022). Furthermore, undermining may negatively impact collaboration within an organization as individuals may lose trust with others. Commitment to the profession may be considered when
transferring or quitting policing. Low contribution measures the amount of work one produces. Quality of work is how well one does their work or a task. If the quality of work is negatively impacted, it could lead to poor interactions with the public or lazy police work. Police collaboration is important as officers must work as a team to do their job effectively. For policing, a reduction in any work-related outcome can be problematic for a department and the field of policing.

Commitment to the Profession. An officer makes a commitment to their job. However, social undermining can cause issues with one’s commitment to police work. The consequences may be leaving a unit, transferring out of a department, or even quitting police work. Several participants shared how social undermining impacted their commitment to their work.

During the interviews, the officers were asked if they considered quitting a direct result of the undermining they experienced. The responses varied significantly. Several officers experienced feelings of wanting to quit the profession altogether. Teddy expressed that during the peak of his being victimized and undermined by coworkers, he struggled with his career choice. “There were several days where I was just, I was done,” he said. A close friend, who was also a victim of undermining behavior, convinced him to stay.

Early into Devin’s career as a police officer in training, he experienced significant undermining behaviors from his coworkers. Consequently, he often reevaluated his decision to become a police officer. Upon breaking down due to the stress of the situation, he asked himself, “Is this the right job for me?” After much reflection, Devin became confident that policing was the right job for him. But if the undermining
continued, he would seek a different police department instead. Devin eventually endured the training and ultimately stayed with his agency.

Although Skip himself never considered leaving policing due to undermining, he shared the experiences of other officers who did. He said, “I know officers in other agencies that have quit and left agencies because of [undermining].” Skip understood the stress that undermining can cause and argued, “Why add one more internal stress? It’s another reason for people leaving the profession.” Policing is already a stressful job, and Skip argued that undermining from within a department only adds to it, causing some to leave the profession altogether.

Some officers wanted to leave their jobs due to undermining, yet most officers rejected the idea. A more common solution was to leave that police agency and look for a new job at another nearby agency instead. These lateral transfers seemed common and were an attempt to escape the undermining events.

As Bently was being undermined, he felt high levels of stress. He was removed as a detective and placed back on shift work, which significantly impacted his career. It also caused him additional stress because he believed he needed to find “another law enforcement agency to go work [for].” Bently said, “I was just going to go to another agency, and I actually did. I applied and went through the process with another agency, and I was hired and given a starting date and everything.” Just as he was about to leave, a friend within the department convinced Bently to stay and work through it. This is another example of how social undermining can cause an officer to consider leaving a department.
Sorty added to this topic by stating that he had never considered quitting his job due to undermining. However, he did witness many people transferring out of units instead. Sorty said, “I’ve seen people try to escape [social undermining].” Although officers may not entirely leave the profession, turnover can still be a consequence of undermining.

Perceived undermining appears to have a variety of negative impacts on commitment to the profession. Some leave the profession because of it, and some do not consider that option. When a subordinate went behind Curtis’s back to speak poorly about him to other K9 officers that he worked with, Curtis said, “I certainly didn't consider leaving the department.” Curtis was willing to continue to work in his department despite being undermined. But Curtis did “consider hanging up canine and not being involved in that anymore.”

Dylan and Landon also did not consider quitting. They felt that they had already invested too much in their field. Devin explained that he would have lost a “tremendous amount of time and pension.” Landon had been a police officer for twenty-five years and could retire after thirty years. He said, “At that point, I’m kind of in for the long haul…There was not much that was going to derail me.” This suggests that officers may simply endure being a victim of undermining to avoid losing their retirement benefits.

If becoming a target of social undermining, some officers considered their commitment to the department. With elevated stress and a lack of motivation and morale, officers considered whether it was worth staying. Some considered transferring out of the department to escape the undermining while witnessing others do so. Although it was not
common for an officer to quit the profession because of social undermining, it appears that seeking employment with different departments is a shared tactic.

**Low Contribution.** When social undermining occurs within a department, it can lead to an officer contributing less to their work and organization. When examining the work outcome of contribution, it is measurable. Low contribution can appear as inefficiency, limited innovation, or missed opportunities. A lack of contribution results in a lower output of work. For an officer, lower work output could be less contact with the public, a reduction in arrests, or even fewer tickets given. Contribution differs from emotional effects, such as motivation, as motivation is the desire to contribute, while contribution is the actual work being accomplished. Throughout the study, several officers exhibited lower contributions due to their undermining experiences.

Larry is a young officer and was promoted to corporal, replacing a tenured officer. As a result of this, some of Larry’s friends and colleagues reacted negatively towards him and withdrew from him. Eventually, Larry reached a breaking point because of this situation. He seriously considered asking for a demotion and going back to the road as a traffic officer. Larry thought, “I’ll just go back to writing speeding tickets. It's way easier than this.” Although patrol work is a necessary part of policing, Larry considered avoiding leadership altogether, thus limiting his contributions in different ways to his department.

After being demoted from his investigator position, Bently experienced several consequences in his career and personal life. Not only was he demoted, but he was accused of poor job performance. For Bently, this was the hardest thing to hear because he believed that he had worked hard at his job. He prided himself in his work ethic, so
being told that his efforts were not adequate really impacted him. “It makes you not want to go out, produce, and work for your agency,” he said. Not only did it negatively impact his morale, but it also made him not want to produce measurable work for his agency since it appeared not to matter when examining job performance. Despite this, he eventually continued to work hard and was eventually promoted again. The entire experience impacted his contributions to the department for some time.

Within Devin’s department, rumors had reached the chief that put him in a negative light. Being too proud to respond to the rumors initially, Devin eventually caved in and discussed it with the chief. “It would affect my career tremendously if I didn’t go talk to that chief,” he said. Devin knew that if he did not talk to the chief, he would have felt disgruntled and wronged by the department. Devin explained the consequences had he not taken action:

I would have probably been hurt enough to cease what I was doing for the police department and just ride my time out…I did a lot of stuff for the police department and created a lot of things, and I would have backed away and said, nope, if that’s what you think of me. Devin felt betrayed by coworkers and questioned why he should even produce work for them if they thought so little of him as an officer. Being undermined by coworkers can lead to low work contributions by an officer within a department. And this can lead to further problems in the officer’s career and the organization.

As a consequence of being undermined, officers considered contributing as little as possible to their departments. This was especially prevalent if participants believed that administrators undermined them. The mentality of producing work for an organization that was run by undermining administrators and supervisors was less than desirable. In one case, an officer pondered asking for a demotion to simply avoid the
undermining and isolation that it caused, therefore limiting the contributions of a qualified officer in a leadership position.

**Reduced Work Quality.** The quality of work is crucial to a department's success. Officers are expected to handle a wide variety of calls while maintaining a high standard. Work quality may be an indirect consequence of social undermining. As some officers experience undermining behaviors from others within their organization, it can increase stress and anxiety, which can, in turn, reduce their quality of work. Further, undermining can demotivate and foster distrust with coworkers, which may consequently impact work quality as well.

Quinton was an investigator for his department for a long time. His supervisors constantly promised to send him to the National Forensics Academy to get better training and to generally improve their investigative unit. Despite this promise, Quinton later found out that his supervisor kept pushing off this promise because he did not want Quinton “to have the same credentials he had.” Not only did this undermining behavior negatively impact Quinton’s career, but it also prevented the agency from developing higher-quality officers and potentially higher-quality work.

When asked how his undermining experience affected his subordinates, Larry suggested that it caused general confusion. When Larry experienced undermining from his supervisors, he did not want to complain about administrators to his subordinates. He feared it would alter their view of those running the department. Because he concealed the problem, it led to confusion among his subordinates. They wondered why Larry was not going to his supervisors for advice or assistance when his subordinates requested it. The disruption in the chain of command could reduce the overall quality of work of
officers. This may be especially apparent if you need assistance yet fear repercussions for asking superiors for help.

Bently explained how social undermining affects the quality of the work within a department. He said, “If you do your job well, you will get noticed. But unfortunately, that draws [negative attention], too.” When an officer is producing high-quality work, it can put a target on them. Other officers may target them, believing that they are making them look bad. They will undermine them and discourage the work of the officer. Clinton contributed to this thought by saying, “In life, no one's happy for anybody, especially in law enforcement. They're not happy to see others get positions they want. They want everything, and they act like they're happy for you, but then they're not.” A consequence of this mentality may lead to officers not going above and beyond their work duties and producing high-quality work to avoid becoming an undermining target.

Social undermining can negatively influence officer work quality. In policing, this may be going above what is expected, creating high-quality reports, or engaging in positive and effective public interactions. When officers perceived social undermining in departments, it appeared to hinder quality work. One officer explained that doing a quality job puts a target on you for others to try to hinder you. In a different example, an undermining supervisor refused to send an officer to training that would improve the quality of work produced by the department.
Collaboration. A large element of collaborating involves coworkers and supervisors. Police officers rely heavily on teamwork. Engaging with coworkers to achieve the department’s goals. Working with coworkers helps propel the department’s mission to serve and protect. It requires building trust with the community. It requires collaboration among the officers. Officers must rely on their coworkers to back them up on calls, give them advice, and support them in this challenging job. Teamwork is crucial to almost every aspect of police work. However, social undermining can jeopardize these teams and friendships, as officers may lose trust in those who undermine them. Undermining can slowly dissolve the trust and cooperation within a police department.

Quinton experienced a loss of trust when several coworkers displayed undermining behaviors. Quinton met with a friend to work on his resume and seek a new position at work. Some coworkers were also present. Quinton saw these coworkers as friends, but then they made comments to him suggesting that he should work on his resume because his current job was in jeopardy. These comments blindsided Quinton. He was surprised by this rude behavior, and he felt betrayed that they would share their opinions in such a public setting. Due to this event, Quinton felt betrayed and lost trust in his coworkers.

Larry explained how his circle of friends shifted after he was promoted. Because of his advancement, other officers made him a target to minor forms of undermining such as corrupting a PowerPoint “so when you give a presentation to the chief, you look incompetent” or “[finding] out what you’re working on and [taking] your idea.” Larry explained that it makes it difficult to determine who his real friends are. He said, “It
really makes you think— who are my friends, and who can I talk to? Who can I share
tings with? Who can I safely collaborate with? It leads to more isolation in the
workplace.” His circle of friends dwindled as Larry continued to advance at work. He
was targeted by others who sought to stifle his career. One would think that obtaining
more tenure at a workplace would naturally increase the number of friends and
acquaintances a person has there. However, the reality is that it actually helps a person
discern who their real friends are over time. This can lead to feelings of isolation as an
officer continues through their career. With fewer people that an officer can trust, they
may not seek to work with others to achieve department goals.

In another example, after being blindsided and blamed for an incident by his
supervisor, Bently was sent back to patrol. This experience significantly impacted
Bently’s feelings towards that supervisor and the administrators who seemingly targeted
the task force he was a part of. With feelings of being undermined by his supervisor and
the administrators, it can be theorized that Bently was less engaged in his work and the
mission of the department. Working under those who targeted him negatively could
negatively impact his commitment to the organization and his work. Bently said that the
relationship was forever changed. He said, “As far as trusting [him] on certain things, that
will never happen again.” Bently reflected on that incident, saying it was sad because that
three-man task force was a tight group, and they were all friends. Bently said this about
that supervisor, “He was my boss, I respected him like my boss, but at the same time he
was a friend. Which made it all the worse.” The friendship was lost. Bently was demoted,
and that event had a rippling effect throughout the department as other officers witnessed
the supervisor's behavior. To this day, Bently makes it a point never to shift the blame on
his subordinates. Instead, he takes accountability for his team’s actions to prevent this undermining behavior from occurring and possibly prevent his officers from feeling less of a commitment to the organization and their work.

From these interviews, one fact was consistent and clear. The officers felt that nothing should impede an officer from assisting another officer on a call. When asked if loss of trust in a coworker affected their decision to call that officer for help in a situation, every officer was quick to say that they could rely on any officer in an emergency. The pettiness, rumors, and undermining are dismissed when an officer is in need. Bently stated that his relationship with his supervisor was ruined, but it was not ruined “enough to where I would not work with him. Because it’s for the greater cause.”

While attending the Southern Police Institute, Clinton shared an experience where he and his subordinates were reprimanded by a superior for how they handled an arrest. At the time of the incident, the supervisor commended the officers for a job well done. However, once he left the scene, the supervisor immediately wrote the officers up. Clinton immediately lost trust in that supervisor, who was also a friend, for not informing him or his officers of his decision to formally reprimand them. In addition to this event, the same supervisor would often criticize how Clinton handled his unit behind his back, leading to further distrust.

An employee not only relies on the relationships they have at work and how they engage with the job, but they also want to be valued. Social undermining can leave officers feeling that they are not valued by the agency. Larry, for example, discussed that a long-time sergeant was unexpectedly removed from his position. That sergeant might feel like their value within the department is insignificant if, on a whim, he is removed.
While at the Southern Police Institute, Larry was informed during his leave that a different officer was going to oversee the drone program for which he was responsible. Larry felt like his value within his department was fading and that he was replaceable. Consequently, he regularly checked his work laptop to try to maintain his connection with what was going on in his department.

Devin heard rumors that the chief was hearing negative things about him. Eventually, Devin went to talk to the chief to clear up the misinformation. The chief explained that she had heard he was a troublesome Field Training Officer. Devin disagreed and suggested to the chief that she should talk to the fifteen officers he had trained to get their thoughts on his work versus listening to unreliable information from outside sources. Disheartened that the administration would not attempt to validate the misinformation, Devin asked, “Why would you put me in charge of the recruits if I’m horrible?” Because of this experience, Devin questioned his value within the organization.

Police require a great deal of teamwork. In most aspects of their work, they must rely on each other to accomplish their mission as a police officer. Despite this crucial need for trust, social undermining disrupts this. Many officers expressed immediate distrust for those who undermined them. Interestingly, despite losing trust in employees, officers still knew they could rely on the very same officer when it came to an emergency or requesting backup. Nonetheless, social undermining degrades collaboration as officers lose trust and friendships with those who undermine.

**Morale.** Organizational morale is a social construct that employees may experience within the workplace. Morale is the attitude that employees have that impacts
their behavior while in the workplace or organization (Johnsrud et al., 2000). For an organization to run effectively, it requires the combined efforts of all those who work within it. However, social undermining can lead employees to respond with negative attitudes towards the organization. For police, the job is taxing and requires a high level of teamwork. Social undermining can break down officer morale and demotivate them from the work they do (Sabeen & Arshad, 2019).

When discussing social undermining in the workplace, it became apparent that it led to consequences for organizational morale. Teddy shared how his department handled those who did not carry out procedures properly. Instead of privately correcting officers when procedures were handled incorrectly, supervisors would send out a mass email to the entire department naming the officers involved and using them as examples. At the expense of publicly shaming some officers, crucial learning opportunities were missed for the officers when supervisors handled situations in this way. This behavior could foster division within the agency. Teddy explained that the officers started to see cliques form, which led to contention between shifts and units. He said, “It was investigations against patrol, and then on patrol, each patrol section against each other.” With undermining occurring in the units of a department, Larry witnessed “low morale” within his specific unit as they often fought against another shift. The inner fighting occurring within the department led to “a very hostile environment.” It may be inferred that working in such an environment can be demoralizing.

Clinton shared an experience where his subordinates were punished for handling a recent incident in his agency. However, the punishment was handled poorly by a superior who told them personally that they did a great job but immediately informed the
administration that they should be punished. Clinton believes this type of situation can be dangerous for morale as officers may feel like they are alone and have no support from their superior officers while doing their jobs. Clinton explained:

> It affects morale in a major way…They don't want to go out there and be proactive because they feel that Chief [John] doesn't have their back… “They're just trying to throw me to the wolves,” and that's the reputation now, not just at my agency but in law enforcement. Don't go above and beyond because the second you screw up; they're going to throw you out the door.

This attitude shared by Clinton can cause a sense of fear for just trying to do the job you have been asked to do. Fear that a coworker or supervisor will find fault in how you handled your work. A perceived lack of support from supervisors leads to feelings of being undermined by the upper management. A fear of being fired or punished can significantly impact one’s morale within an organization in a negative way.

Bently believed his undermining experience caused him to be demoted. Bently was told that he was not producing enough work, although he completely disagreed. On top of this, he felt that his statistics as an investigator said otherwise. However, he was demoted by his supervisor, given an undesirable shift, and a cut in his pay. This experience seriously impacted his morale. He felt that he was working hard, yet he was being told that he was not doing enough. He stated, “It makes you not want to go out, produce, and work for your agency.” Bently felt defeated by this and, in response to the lack of confidence from his superiors, considered looking elsewhere for a job for a time. He said that it “made me really question whether or not I wanted to continue in the field.” Although he stayed, it is apparent that that experience impacted his morale.
Larry shared an experience where the undermining of a lieutenant in his department caused a general decrease in morale. A watch commander was responsible for several patrol teams in the department. After the commander confronted the lieutenant that a patrol team that he was not responsible for was causing problems, the lieutenant stated it was not his team and, therefore, not his responsibility. Consequently, the watch commander closed the door and yelled at this lieutenant in front of other officers. Larry said:

This Lieutenant, highly qualified, highly intelligent. And he just said, nope, done. Turned in his two weeks. [He said], ‘I’m not putting up with this. I know my career is done now because she holds grudges forever.’ And he left and went out to [a different] department.

Larry reflected on this experience and explained the impact it had on the other patrol officers in the department. Morale dropped within the department after this event. The officers in this department believed that the watch commander undermined a solid leader, and it made an impact on their morale within the department. Larry explained that the department felt a collective sense of surprise and doubt in their administration. Larry shared how the department felt; officers’ thought, “If he left, and he’s really calm, even-tempered and everything. It must be bad here. Maybe I should look somewhere else.” The perceived undermining going on with the watch commander and their supervisors led to many officers feeling less motivated to work hard and climb the ranks.

After being undermined and removed as a zone commander and moved to a lieutenant position over the third shift, Brandon felt extremely isolated from the department. Most of the officers he supervised were young, and he had a hard time relating to them. The isolation was exacerbated as he sought to maintain professional distance by avoiding socializing with his subordinates outside of work. The isolation, in
addition to his anger towards the underminer who talked behind his back, was a “huge disruption” to his life. Although he tried not to let it affect his work and morale, he said, “There’s no way that it could not have.”

Quinton was removed from the CSI unit in his department, and he believed he had been targeted by a coworker who had never liked him. Quinton made a comment in a meeting about his job, and the underminers took it to their superiors, blowing what had occurred out of proportion. At this point, Quinton had been in the department for over fourteen years. Although this was a drastic life change after being in the CSI unit for a decade, Quinton expressed that the experience did not impact him as negatively as it might have impacted others. However, he did explain that if it were earlier in his career, it would have been devastating. He explained “A lot of times when officers go through situations like that, then they develop a negative attitude. They don't want to go to work and do anything.” When undermined, the drive to work hard and continue can be diminished. Although Quinton did not feel a lack of morale in his own undermining experience, his tenure in the field allowed him to provide personal experiences of other officers who did lose morale in the job.

During Devin’s tenure as an officer, a problematic corporal was labeled as a serial underminer. This corporal had a friendly relationship with the chief and would often spread misinformation to her. When Devin was seeking a sergeant promotion, the chief explained that she had heard some rumors about him. Believing that it was the troublesome corporal, Devin corrected the false information and was eventually promoted. Despite his promotion, Devin continued to witness that corporal continually
causing issues throughout the department for others. Devin said that this made it a “constant struggle” to work.

Morale is a crucial part of any organization. Many officers shared how they felt about their jobs and their morale in those jobs. When asked how a social undermining supervisor can affect a person and department, Dylan noted that “it affects morale.” Decreased morale can thus become a consequence of perceived social undermining behaviors within a department. Consequently, it may lead to reduced enthusiasm and dedication for the job.

**Summary of RQ2**

Social undermining is problematic and is used to target individuals to prohibit their work success and damage their reputation. It can negatively impact various aspects of officers’ lives and jobs. Being a victim of social undermining can impact well-being outcomes, such as emotional and physical health. It can also negatively impact work-related outcomes, leaving officers feeling less committed to policing, a reduction in contribution to their agency, lower work quality, less collaboration among coworkers, and lowered morale.

**Research Question 3**

**RQ3.** How do police officers address undermining?

Social undermining appears to be a pervasive issue in the police departments in which the subjects worked. Several officers reported experiencing or witnessing this harmful behavior. Social undermining can lead to numerous negative consequences, which are often ignored and not addressed. The third research question aims to ask
officers how they and others can tackle this problem. Specifically, how can officers individually address social undermining in policing?

Avoid/Ignore It

Officers suggested several ways to handle an undermining scenario based on personal experience or consideration of the situation. One of these ways was to avoid or ignore social undermining. This may include avoiding a problematic officer who continually undermines. It may include a victim ignoring the negative allegations or behaviors of others. For some officers, avoiding or ignoring the problem was a simple solution.

Larry presented a unique perspective as the youngest officer in the study. In his department where consistent undermining occurs, Larry reflected on the best way to handle it. Larry said, “The best days I had were days I didn’t go to the Police Department. I would just go out, answer my calls, and go home.” This illustrates that some officers seek to avoid the source of undermining in their department. It is deemed better to simply avoid going into the headquarters and to do your job than interact with one’s coworkers.

At one time, another detective accused Landon of harassment. When asked how he addressed the issue afterward, he said, “I was pretty cold to her…I extended the olive branch. It blew up in my face. There’s no talking…not a word.” Landon simply avoided the accuser at all costs. Letting the internal investigation prove his innocence, Landon did not want to exacerbate the problem by talking to that coworker.

Two officers shared very similar sentiments on ignoring the undermining behaviors. Devin said, “Probably like I did, just ignore it and move on.” Sorty expressed similarly, “You don’t get involved, and if someone talks about you, you don’t let it bother
you. You move on.” Not getting involved in office politics or workplace banter is the best solution for social undermining for some officers. Often, officers will continue with their work and ignore it when someone undermines them. Quinton concluded that “time will heal all wounds.”

Skip and Brandon stated that those who undermine often display that behavior repeatedly. Consequently, these offenders are labeled by others as problematic. Skip explained that these offenders “continue to do it, and [they] start developing a pattern, and people are going to catch on to that.” As a result, these offenders are avoided and disliked in the workplace. Sometimes, coworkers confront them. All of this adds to disruption in the workplace.

**Talk It Out**

Another strategy to address social undermining at the individual level is to “talk it out.” Eight officers in the study suggested approaching the person who is undermining and discussing the situation with them. They felt that this was a good way to address undermining. Although not all followed this advice during their experiences with undermining, many reflected afterward that they wished they had handled it that way. Speaking to those who are undermining may clear up misinformation and eliminate further behaviors.

After Curtis was undermined, he regretted not directly approaching the underminer to talk it out. The misinformation could have been cleared up, and the behavior stopped. Dylan added to this by saying that it should be expected for the underminer and the victim to “work it out together… talk about it.” Curtis clarified that a discussion between the two cannot happen if defensive attitudes are involved.
As the Union president in his area, Landon recalled an experience where two officers did not get along and would “do something [or] say something” against each other behind their backs. Landon believed that how he handled this situation could serve as a good solution for undermining. Landon acted as a mediator between the two parties. They discussed their disagreement, and then Landon recommended actions for both parties to take. Bridging the ever-growing rift between the two officers as a mediator assisted in quelling their bitterness.

During a meeting, Quinton was asked what motivated him to do his job, to which he responded that it was “paying the bills.” According to Quinton, an undermining supervisor called the chief directly and exacerbated the statement. The chief responded by demoting Quinton due to his lack of commitment to the job. Quinton did not approach his underminer directly to talk. However, he did have the opportunity to talk to the chief later about the false allegations against him. The chief was told that Quinton said much more egregious things in a meeting, which led to his discipline. With this information, Quinton was able to explain the situation from his perspective. The discussion with the chief was positive, and Quinton said, “We came eye to eye, and he understood [the situation].” Discussing misinformation started through undermining, especially with administrators, can provide an additional perspective. It also allows a target of undermining to address the problem and correct it.

Acceptance

Several officers felt there was little they could do to address social undermining at the individual level. “It happens everywhere. As long as people are people…people want what other people have,” Quinton explained. Skip added to this by saying, “I think if it's
going to happen, it’s going to happen.” Devin suggested that new officers are at a
particular disadvantage in these situations due to the fact that they are fearful of speaking
up on the issue. This can leave new officers feeling like nothing can be done to handle
their situation of being victimized.

Clinton shared a similar sentiment, believing there was little officers could do to
address undermining. Clinton believes policing is currently in an age where
administrators avoid honesty and transparency for fear of being involved in legal
lawsuits. According to him, administrators are vague about their reasoning and decision-
making, using terminology such as “we’re going to go in a different direction” to avoid
getting into the specifics of their actions.

Many officers believed that they could do something individually to address
undermining. An officer could avoid or ignore the issue within their department. The
majority of officers believed that approaching and talking to the offender or underminer
about their behavior and false allegations could mitigate and address the issue. Some
believe that it is the responsibility of leaders to be aware of undermining within their unit
and to address it with the parties involved. Finally, some officers expressed that little
could be done by an individual officer or a leader. Social undermining will always exist
wherever pride, envy, and jealousy are found.

**Summary of RQ3**

In the study, several officers suggested ways that individuals could address social
undermining. Some were personal experiences, while others were mere suggestions.
Some officers said to ignore or avoid the undermining or the person responsible.
Although it does not directly solve the problem, it could alleviate the negative outcomes
that come from it. Other officers suggested talking to the person undermining to understand why they were targeted and correct misinformation. Finally, several officers argued it cannot be addressed. As long as humans are doing police work, there will always be undermining as officers envy what others have.

Research Question 4

RQ4. How do police officers believe police organizations should address undermining?

In addition to asking officers how they can handle undermining at an individual level, they were also asked how departments can address social undermining. Because each department throughout the country is unique, the handling of social undermining must be customized for each department. One solution may work well for one department but may not work well for another.

Leadership

Several officers expressed the need for administrators to ensure that high-quality leaders are in charge of units within departments. Larry believed that an effective leader should be knowledgeable and able to address social undermining. An effective leader should communicate and talk out issues with their subordinates. A good leader should not undermine an officer who has failed at a task. Instead, that leader should use that opportunity to correct the officer and help them learn and improve. If these failures are addressed quickly, then the quality of work in a department will be enhanced. Also, if undermining is identified in an individual officer in the department, a good leader should not excuse that behavior or allow it to continue.
Bently shared interesting insight as a leader. He expressed his desire to be aware of any undermining behaviors amongst the ranks of his officers. According to Bently, undermining begins with little things and sometimes snowballs into much larger problems. As a result, it needs to be addressed as soon as possible. Bently recommended talking with other supervisors and working together to find a way to “put an end to the little stuff.”

According to Curtis, a good leader establishes the department's culture by modeling good behavior. If a supervisor is out drinking with his subordinates and joining in office banter, it can validate and encourage some problematic behavior. Leaders must shut down and not participate in problematic behaviors, including social undermining. Intervention early on by leaders can also prevent the continual spread of undermining behaviors.

According to Dylan, Curtis, and Kevin, it is the responsibility of all levels of leadership within a department to address undermining. It is the responsibility of the upper administration to ensure that qualified officers are placed into leadership roles. It is their responsibility to understand the objectives of the department, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the unit to which they are assigned. The leadership needs to be aware of any social undermining occurring within their department and which units and individuals are involved. Curtis explained that leaders should be teaching officers to take accountability for their actions and to avoid negative thinking about fellow officers. Curtis also explained that sergeants and corporals should guide their officers and ensure that they know and understand what acceptable behavior is and what it is not. Good
leaders should teach their subordinates to focus on self-improvement instead of looking outward and finding fault with others.

Open Communication

Officers suggested another way departments can address social undermining—open communication. In Brandon’s department, a serious undermining event occurred within the department. Brandon explained that the administrators sent out a department-wide email along with reiterating at shift roll calls that the undermining occurrence was an active internal investigation and should not be discussed. As a result, the department asked everyone to refrain from talking about it. Brandon felt like this was effective as it “really impacted only a couple of people, and it wasn’t that disruptive.” With recognition from the administration and openly telling the department not to discuss the investigation, the situation was controlled. This was viewed as a more positive approach than attempting to hide the issue or ignore it.

When upper administrators were involved in an issue, Teddy expressed the need for them to be transparent with their decisions to those below them. When not receiving a promotion, Teddy approached the chief to discuss “instead of getting my feeling hurt.” The chief explained how the selection process went and why he was not selected. From this interaction, Teddy “understood his decision.” When subordinates are aware of why a decision was made, it can shut down any false information from circulating as a result. Teddy explained that if someone from upper management is undermining, there is not much that can be done from the organizational side to prohibit this behavior. Open communication from department heads is critical to help prevent rumors and misinformation from being caused by undermining.
Policy

An additional way in which departments can help address social undermining is through policy. Policy is not requirements on what must occur, but rather guiding principles that must be followed in activities that fall within either specific organizational objectives or the overall police mission” (Alpert & Smith, 1994). Department policy is a guide for how officers should think as they do their work. Some officers expressed that policy was critical in addressing undermining behaviors within the department. Skip explained that his department had a policy in place regarding false allegations. If false allegations were directed at anyone maliciously within the department, then the offender could be terminated as a result. This policy protected officers against rumors, gossip, and false allegations.

Brandon and Merton also expressed that their respective departments had policies in place to hinder and address undermining behaviors. But even with these policies in place, Brandon said that some people still undermined others. Because undermining is often something done in private, it can be challenging to track and target the offender underminer responsible for it. Merton provided unique insight as a chief of police over his department. He explained that when it comes to social undermining, “there are certain policies that we have within the department that kind of vaguely cover that area.” Although a specific policy regarding undermining may not exist, the administration should still step in if a victim can prove they were intentionally undermined.

Written policies may be helpful in addressing social undermining. However, not all the subjects in the study indicated that their agencies had such policies. In Dylan’s department, he believed no such policy was available. Dylan could see the benefit of
laying out specific policies defining social undermining and the consequences of such behavior. With policies in place, specific punishments could be outlined. Having consequences for social undermining could be a way to prevent undermining and give power to its victims.

Along with policy, officers should be trained on ways their department addresses undermining. Training can be done for new officers who enter the department. Dylan suggested that training should be done regularly to ensure that officers are aware of undermining. Merton suggested that these trainings could define social undermining and teach officers what they can do if they are victimized in such a way.

**Fairness in Decision Making and Promotions**

Another essential component in agencies addressing social undermining in policing is fairness in decision-making. It was important to several officers that the process of decision-making among administrators be rooted in fairness. Many police officers gravitate to a specific group within a department. If a member of that group is placed in a position of power, they may bring those within their group up with them in rank as a reward. It was believed that not all administrators look for qualified, deserving people to serve in a position. Favoritism was perceived prevalently in policing. As a result, several officers in the study expressed the need for administrations to ensure institutional fairness throughout.

In Curtis’ experience, social undermining was most prevalent during times of promotion. Curtis said that if an administrator chooses their friends during the promotional process, others in the department often “feel like the process is illegitimate. You may feel more apt to do some conniving because it’s not a fair process.” By making
the promotion process as fair as possible, Curtis believes officers will be more likely to prove they deserve the spot rather than undermine others to get ahead. Sorty further supported this logic, claiming that undermining would be more prevalent if administrators allowed some form of internal campaigning for a position. Sorty said, “Once you make it a popularity contest, then you’re going to have undermining.” It is the responsibility of the administrators in the department to legitimize the promotion process as much as possible to ensure that it is handled fairly, thus minimizing undermining.

Similarly, Dylan suggested that perhaps during these promotional efforts, a more thorough and transparent process could be established to ensure equity. Measures should be implemented into the process to make sure that the most deserving and qualified candidates are selected. Dylan suggested a point deduction system could be put in place so that when an officer incurs an infraction, points would be deducted from their overall performance on the job. This system could then be used to either impede or help an officer during the promotion process. A tangible score regarding their work could be evaluated. Such a system could elevate those officers who follow policy and work hard while punishing those who continue to display problematic behavior such as undermining. Dylan believes that if a behavior is “viewed negatively, I think you’re less likely to do it.” Administrators should ensure their promotion processes are as fair as possible to allow qualified individuals to be in leadership positions.

**Summary of RQ4**

The final research question asked officers what they thought police organizations could do to address social undermining. Many expressed the need for good and effective leadership throughout the organization. It was argued that good leaders would be able to
identify social undermining occurring within their subordinates and handle it before it became worse. Open communication from the administration was also encouraged. Administrators could be transparent about why they make the decisions they make to prevent the spread of rumors and misinformation. Policy was often mentioned through the interviews. Some had personal experiences where department policy was utilized to quell undermining behaviors. However, several officers were unsure if their department had a policy that addressed undermining, while some were certain no policy existed. Finally, officers expressed the need for department heads to be fair in their decision-making and promotional process. Some experiences were shared where police leaders chose friends for other leadership positions rather than based solely on qualifications. During times of promotion, several examples of undermining were presented. Administrators could lay out a clear path for how promotions may occur to reduce undermining behaviors.

**Summary of Findings**

The study provides valuable insight into policing and social undermining in the United States. Throughout the interview process, every officer had a personal experience where they were either a victim of social undermining themselves or they witnessed the victimization of another officer.

Similar to the literature found on the topic of social undermining, this study’s subjects reported that social undermining impacted various aspects of their professional lives (Duffy et al., 2002; Dunn & Schweitzer, 2006; Sabeen & Arshad, 2019). Officers had varying effects on well-being outcomes, emotional effects, and work-related outcomes (Duffy et al., 2002; Hershcovis & Barling, 2010; Sabeen & Arshad, 2019).
Many officers experienced unfavorable consequences to their well-being, manifested as negative morale for them and their agency, negative emotional health, and physical health (Duffy et al., 2006; Hepburn & Enns, 2013). Work-related outcomes were seen throughout the study, with officers feeling less committed to their work, lowered contribution to their organizations, reduced work quality, distrust among employees, and a decrease in morale (Eissa & Wyland, 2016; Hershcovic & Barling, 2010; Khan et al., 2022).

Understanding the reality of the problem among police agencies, officers provided insight into how officers at an individual level could address social undermining. Officers suggested ignoring or avoiding those who were undermining them or others. The majority of officers proposed communicating with the offender about the situation. Some officers found success with this approach in their own experiences. Finally, several officers believed that not much could be done to address social undermining.

This research asked subjects what departments and administrators could do to address undermining. Officers suggested leadership to address social undermining. Effective leaders will identify and handle undermining behaviors before they are permitted to continue. Open communication was also suggested as a way for administrators and leaders to address undermining. Administrators should be open and transparent with their decision-making processes. In this way, officers are educated as to why certain decisions are made, and misinformation is reduced. Several participants had seen department policy used to address social undermining to varying effectiveness. Many officers were unsure if their department had a policy that targeted undermining. So, it was suggested that having a formal policy regarding undermining in a department was
a way to manage this issue. Several officers suggested providing training on the topic of social undermining in a department. This training would define undermining for officers, help them learn to identify it and give them resources to seek justice and stop this behavior if needed. Lastly, many officers argued for administrators to be completely fair and impartial during the promotion process. At times, officers were discouraged because they felt the promotion process was wrought with favoritism. It made them feel like the whole process was illegitimate. When the promotion process was perceived as unfair, it could be suggested that officers may use problematic ways, such as social undermining, to get an advantage over others. Total fairness in this process could avoid some undermining behaviors in an already competitive environment.
Police officers in the United States often experience stress related to their occupation. Such exposure can cause various consequences to one's physical and mental health (Craddock & Telesco, 2022; Ingram et al., 2013; Paoline, 2003; Paoline & Terrill, 2005; Silver et al., 2017). Although several aspects of policing have been examined over the decades, social undermining has been overlooked. Social undermining has been shown to be consequential for employees and organizations (Hershcovis, 2011; Rousseau, 2020). As employees are socially undermined, it can hinder their work success, relationships, and reputation (Duffy et al., 2002). If targeted by an underminer, an officer may experience lower well-being outcomes and counterproductive work outcomes (Anwar & Sidin, 2016; Duffy et al., 2002; Sabeen & Arshad, 2019). If employees experience adverse effects due to internal social undermining, it can impact an organization.

The study explored social undermining and its prevalence within policing using a convenience sample of long-serving police supervisors across the United States. While some research examines police officers and social undermining, it has not been examined within the United States (Duffy et al., 2002; Duffy et al., 2006). Consequently, an effort was made to understand an under-researched topic better.

The study used qualitative semi-structured interviews with police officers. The central research questions sought to understand whether social undermining occurred
within police departments and, if so, how it affected officers. A qualitative approach was ideal so the participants could share their experiences with the social phenomenon and its consequences. Due to the under-researched topic of social undermining in this setting, the study utilized thematic analysis.

A blended technique of inductive and deductive thematic analysis was used. Thematic analysis allows meaning to be extracted from the data through patterns (Lockmiller, 2021; Nowel et al., 2017). Providing a definition of social undermining at the start of each interview, participants shared their experiences. Deductive thematic analysis was used to extract elements of social undermining while allowing additional themes to emerge throughout the data using inductive coding (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

The study's results suggest that social undermining appears to occur in some police departments. Every officer could recall a personal experience where they had been undermined. The participants also provided examples of witnessing others within their departments being undermined. The effects of being undermined were vast and negatively impacted most participants. Some officers provided personal experiences on how they addressed it and ideas as to how departments could do so.

**Implications**

The study examined social undermining among police officers. Fourteen police officers in leadership positions were interviewed. The research questions were answered using thematic analysis. According to the participants' experiences, social undermining appears to be occurring in agencies and affecting police officers. Participants also
suggested some ways that individual officers and departments may be able to address this problem. Each research question is presented within this discussion.

**RQ1.** Do police officers experience social undermining?

The interviews showed that all officers had perceived being undermined. From the experiences of officers, undermining ranged from consistent small behaviors to significant events that caused major life changes. In addition to the personal experiences of being victims, many officers shared experiences of being witnesses to other undermining events within their departments. All officers involved in the study were in a leadership capacity. Despite their tenure and experience, social undermining occurs throughout their careers. Some officers experienced undermining within their department during the study, while others recalled experiences that occurred earlier in their careers.

The interviews showed that social undermining occurs within the sample of police officers. Interestingly, in a field that relies so heavily on unity and solidarity existing among its officers, seeing social undermining occur is problematic. It can break down trust and cause negative attitudes and behaviors in police organizations.

**RQ2.** How does undermining affect police officers?

Since all the participants perceived victims of some form of undermining throughout their careers, they provided valuable insight into its effects. All officers experienced some form of negative consequence due to social undermining. Most commonly, participants experienced adverse effects on their well-being, specifically their mental health. Only a few officers experienced some form of physical health effect. Although these officers were being negatively impacted by their undermining experience, some found prosocial ways to cope with the negative outcomes, thus actually improving
their health. Also seen were consequences for work-related outcomes. It appeared rare for participants to consider quitting the field of policing entirely; however, several officers tried to escape undermining by seeking employment in different departments. A few officers also saw reductions in the contribution and quality of their work. Not only is this problematic for officers, but it can also impede agencies as their employees may be less effective on the job. Several participants shared a loss in trust with coworkers due to undermining behaviors. Examples of negatively impacted morale were also seen in the sample.

The effects officers experienced in this sample supported existing findings. Social undermining has been shown to negatively impact employees. Specifically, it impacts employee’s personal well-being and work effectiveness (Anwar & Sidin, 2016; Duffy et al., 2002; Hepburn & Enns, 2013; Hershcovis & Barling, 2010; Lee et al., 2016; Sabeen & Arshad, 2019; Shaheen, 2022). For police research, seeing impediments to work outcomes was also similar to the findings in this study (Duffy et al., 2002).

RQ. How do police officers address undermining?

During the interviews, participants provided personal opinions on how individuals could address undermining. These opinions were based on their individual experiences or thoughts regarding how undermining could be addressed. Some officers believed there was little that an officer could do to address undermining as it is inevitable. Despite this attitude by some, several solutions were averred throughout the sample. Some officers suggested that an individual officer should simply ignore and avoid it. Many officers suggested approaching the perpetrator and discussing the situation with them to clear up
misinformation. Several officers believed that good leaders should recognize this behavior within their unit and take a mediating role to address the behavior.

RQ4. How do police officers believe police organizations should address undermining?

The participants provided ways for departments and administrators to address social undermining within the organization. Officers shared a sentiment that administrators needed to ensure that qualified leaders who understood the department's goals and the unit's needs were being selected. A good leader would be able to identify undermining within his unit and assess the best way to handle it. It was suggested that, at times, leaders could act as a mediator between feuding parties. Open communication was frequently mentioned by subjects. It was suggested that such communication would provide insight into the decision-making process and reduce misinformation and conjecture.

Some participants shared experiences of departmental policy being utilized to punish undermining behavior. However, the majority of officers stated that their department did not have an applicable policy or were unsure if such a policy existed. Several steps could be taken by agencies related to policies. First, each agency should establish a policy that addresses social undermining by prohibiting rumors, false allegations, or other problematic conduct toward fellow officers. Second, the policy should clearly explain the procedure and consequences of the behavior. Third, the department should inform and train their employees on the policy. Specifically, what social undermining is, why it is bad for individuals and organizations, what the consequences will be, and how to report it. Creating policy empowers individuals to seek ways to address social undermining formally.
Additionally, some officers suggested that training related to social undermining could be done. This training would be conducted in departments to explain what social undermining is, its consequences, and what an officer could do if a victim of it. Finally, officers expressed the need for fair decision-making within departments. One officer suggested a clear set of rules for promotions where good behavior contributed to promotion while negative behaviors would be detrimental. Setting these rules could prevent officers from undermining to try to “get ahead” during promotional times.

Prior research supports the proposed departmental solutions elicited from subjects. Several studies have identified the need for administrators to be aware of social undermining and implement strategies to counter it within the culture (Duffy et al., 2012; Dunn & Schweitzer, 2006; Pheko, 2018). Policy implementation has also been shown to be a helpful way to address undermining within organizations (Anwar & Sidin, 2016; Pheko, 2018). Support has also been echoed for more training and interventions that tackle the causes and behaviors of social undermining (Beheshtifar, 2014; Duffy et al., 2002; Jung & Yoon, 2019).

**Policy Implications**

The findings in this study have practical implications for police administrators, officers, and researchers. They have shown that social undermining may well be a prevalent problem within policing and has negative effects on police officers. The study also allowed officers to offer solutions for officers and departments to address social undermining. As a result of the study, employees within police organizations need to be aware of social undermining and develop strategies to combat it. The consequences of
being a victim of social undermining can be significant and negatively impact the officer
and the organization, reducing its effectiveness.

It may be questioned whether police agencies are doing enough to combat
perpetrators and assist victims of social undermining. Social undermining occurs
frequently in many organizations, especially in highly competitive work environments
(Hershcovis & Barling, 2010; Reh et al., 2018; Vinokur & Van Ryn, 1993). Although
some agencies have policies related to problematic conduct toward other employees, it
does not appear to be required. It is the responsibility of decision-makers within police
departments to create or expand on policy to target social undermining. If department
policy does exist within agencies that target undermining, administrators must make their
officers aware of it. Administrators must clearly state that undermining violates
institutional conduct and that every officer is valuable to the agency. Administrators
should foster a positive culture and environment within the department and encourage
officers to utilize the chain of command to seek assistance when undermined. The
procedures by which officers may be able to report social undermining should be clear
and handled to ensure the victim's privacy and avoid retaliation.

Administrators should examine the results of this study to find ways to improve
their departments. The study may help identify problems and consider ways to address
them in a way that fits their department. Department heads and leaders should be talking
to their officers about undermining. If it occurs, ask what the officer would like to do to
handle it. If identifying the problem and resolving it, a department could proactively
combat turnover. With a shortage of police officers across the United States, keeping
qualified officers who may transfer because of undermining could be essential (Police Executive Research Forum, 2023).

Furthermore, police agencies should implement training that discusses social undermining. This training could occur at the start of an officer's career in the academy or in their respective departments. The training should be conducted periodically to inform new employees of department policy and for new leaders as the command structure changes over time. Additionally, many police departments utilize outside training for their personnel, leading to a great need for all training, inside a department or within, to address social undermining in the profession. Training can teach officers what the social phenomenon is and explain what they can do within the department if victimized. Many officers in the study were unaware of ways they could formally address social undermining. Explaining the procedures officers should use when undermining could be an effective measure in combatting it. Often, the results for both an underminer and those undermined led to social isolation, punishment, or quitting to escape it. Some evidence suggests that social support may be a way to combat some of the negative consequences of undermining. Social support can be a critical element in improving worker morale and deflecting the bombarding strain caused by work (Patterson, 2003; Waters & Ussery, 2007). Policymakers and administrators could make it a point to build and strengthen supervisor and coworker support.

On a broader scale, several undermining experiences appeared to be related to promotion or money. Several officers expressed the desire to be promoted to make a larger salary. A greater salary would not only impact the officer immediately but also significantly impact their retirement benefits. As such, many officers strive to make as
much money as possible to be better off upon retirement. It may be beneficial to evaluate retirement benefits to not be solely based on the salary an officer makes upon retirement. As is, officers may seek to advance as much as possible to achieve a better retirement through any means necessary.

Limitations

A few limitations exist within this study. First, the sample used was a convenience sample. Although the participants were from across the United States, the results are limited because the sample was a non-probability sampling method and readily available to the researcher. As a result, the generalizability of the study is limited and may not represent all police officer’s experiences. Secondly, the sample size was only fourteen and, therefore, likely not be representative of all officers.

Third, the study lacks diversity. The sample was comprised of mostly White males and one Non-White male officer. Female officers have a much different experience in the male-dominated profession of policing (Veldman et al., 2017). Consequently, female officers feel less welcomed into the field, experience greater harassment, and often feel better equipped than their male counterparts to handle stress (Seklecki & Paynich, 2007). With a different policing experience, female officers may experience social undermining differently. Similarly, officers of color have unique experiences, such as facing discrimination within policing (Donohue, 2021). Women officers and officers of color may experience different stressors in policing, which could then lead to different social undermining effects. Diversity allows for different perspectives on topics. The study, therefore, is limited, and future research should make it a point to ensure a diverse sample.
A fourth limitation of the study is the tenure and rank of those involved. The study had a unique sample of veteran police officers who were active department leaders. Although the experiences spread throughout their careers, they may not apply to young, new officers. With a new generation of police officers seeking to advance in the field, it is unknown their perspective on social undermining and how it has affected them thus far in their careers. The officers interviewed were in coveted positions that some officers fight for. As a result, it may ignore the competitive nature of the field as a fresh officer.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

As an exploratory study of an understudied topic, future research must be conducted to understand social undermining and its effects on policing. The first recommendation is to replicate the study at a larger scale. This includes having more participants from various parts of the United States. Researchers should aim for more participants, ideally via random sampling. Although the study showed that social undermining affected every officer at some point in their career, it would be helpful to investigate why and how it happened. Examining the department size and whether it was a municipal or sheriff’s department could be further explored. As the public votes in a sheriff, this type of agency could be more political internally, which is unique compared to a command structure with an appointed chief. Additionally, to see how officers responded to it in a larger sample to allow greater generalizability.

Future researchers should further examine the environment and culture of police departments and how undermining may affect them. Specifically, if police culture allows social undermining to occur more or less frequently than other organizations. This exploratory study discussed the foundation of police culture but did not directly
investigate it. Examining how social undermining may impact culture and the organization could yield interesting results. Unique subcultures exist within departments as units or cliques can form. Thus, a form of tribalism can exist within departments, which some officers suggest is significantly problematic in undermining.

Relatedly, researchers should examine promotional times within departments as they relate to social undermining. Several experiences that were related to some form of career advancement were mentioned throughout the study. It can be assumed that the goal of most officers is to advance above traditional patrol work in favor of greater responsibilities and more pay. However, with a rigid chain of command, open leadership positions may be few. It may be suggested that times of promotions can be competitive and may see significant undermining behaviors as a result.

Another recommendation for research is to ensure a more diverse sample. Gender and race have unique experiences within law enforcement (Donohue, 2021; Seklecki & Paynich, 2007). Understanding the unique viewpoints of officers in the minority is crucial to better understanding social undermining in policing. Furthermore, future research could examine how gender and race impact being a target of social undermining or undermining others. Understanding who falls victim to undermining and who is perpetrating it could provide additional insight into the problem and assist in creating strategies to address it.

In addition to a more diverse sample, future research should ensure that police officers of every rank in a department are included. Cadets, patrol officers, detectives, administrators, and non-sworn staff should all be examined. Younger officers are often in a position where they have the ambition to move up the ranks. If social undermining is a
way to hinder one’s professional career, then it would be assumed that it occurs frequently during promotional time. As a result, patrol officers may provide unique insight into undermining and when it occurs most frequently.

Additionally, future research may consider using a mixed-method approach utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data. A quantitative approach could be used to survey individuals, asking for information on the underminers they were targeted by. It would also provide more workable data on when the undermining occurred, how frequently, and how it was solved. This strategy could then be paired with a qualitative method where officers could provide additional insight into their experience and how it affected them. Although social phenomena can be challenging to predict, gathering such evidence could lead to predictions on when undermining may occur most frequently and with whom. The study conducted was one of the first to attempt to understand social undermining in policing better and should be a point for future academic studies.

Finally, future studies should examine social undermining and police department policy. During the interviews, the majority of police officers claimed their department had no written policy on how to address social undermining. When reviewing police policy for many police departments within the sample, only a few existed that address officer conduct towards other employees. Future research could examine what policies exist, how they are used, and whether they are effective in addressing social undermining.

Conclusion

The research conducted in the study examines police officers and their experiences with social undermining. The study found that the sampled police officers experienced social undermining throughout their careers. Social undermining is
problematic as it can impact their well-being, emotional and work-related outcomes. With police work already demanding a lot from individuals, it is just as necessary to understand and address the issues within their departments. Social undermining appeared to occur in many aspects of an officer's career, even with those in high leadership positions within their departments. With the frequency of undermining, finding effective ways to counter and address the problems is critical. The officers in this study provided examples and suggested ways an officer and an organization may be able to handle social undermining.

With this study, further light was shed on social undermining in policing. The study also provided possible solutions that officers, leaders, and administrators could implement within their departments. This research provides a small glimpse into social undermining in police agencies in the United States. As such, it may provide a starting point for further exploration of this topic. Such future research can better understand the frequency of undermining.
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APPENDIX 1. POLICE POLICY MANUALS

Dekalb County Police Department Policy Manual, 341.3.2 (2013)

Lake County Sheriff’s Office Policy Manual, 1002.7 (2019)

Washoe County Sheriff’s Office Policy Manual, 2-2.68 (2020)
APPENDIX 2. INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Undermining Among Police Officers - Personal Script Interview Questions v2
1. How old are you?
2. How long have you been a police officer?
3. What is your current rank?
4. How much schooling have you completed? (Highschool, Associates, Bachelors, Masters, PhD)
5. What part of the United States of America are you currently employed in:
   a. Procure map of USA (West, Midwest, Northeast, South)
6. How many people do you think are in your department?
   a. Civilian/Sworn
7. Conversation is related to social undermining or sometimes referred to as backstabbing which is defined as:
   a. Behavior intended to hinder, over time, a worker’s ability to establish and maintain positive interpersonal relationships, work-related success, and favorable reputation (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002)
8. Have you had any experiences with social undermining in your career as a police officer?
   a. Do you have a particular experience that you can recall?
   b. Could you describe the perpetrator some more?
      i. Gender, rank, age, position
   c. When did that experience happen in your career? (Academy, Post-Academy, Promotion)
9. How did that experience impact you?
   a. Do you feel like it affected your career?
   b. Affect your social relationships,
   c. Affect your reputation
   d. Affect your mental health (stress, anxiety, depression, etc.)?
10. How did you respond to that experience?
11. How did your experience end or get resolved?

General Questions
12. Have you seen someone else be a victim to undermining?
13. What do you think are the consequences of undermining for police officers?
14. Why do you think people in police organizations do it?
15. How do you think police officers should handle this type of behavior?
16. Have you considered leaving your job because of undermining?
17. What ways do you think departments can prevent undermining in the workplace?
a. What ways do you think officers can prevent it?
18. Is there anything else you’d like to talk about this topics/undermining?
APPENDIX 3. INFORMED CONSENT FORM

UNDERMINING AMONG POLICE OFFICERS

Dear Participant:

You are being invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to discuss and record your thoughts, feelings, and experiences with undermining (backstabbing) and gossip in policing. This study is conducted by Weston Anderson under the direction of Thomas Hughes, PhD, of the University of Louisville.

Your participation in the study will involve being in an private interview that discusses various aspects of undermining and gossip in policing. The study will take approximately 60 minutes to complete. There are no known risks for your participation in this research study. The information you provide will be used for future research to shed light on the prevalence and problems that police officers experience internally and how it might add to one’s stress. Your information will be stored at the University of Louisville in a secured office and secured cabinet only accessible by the researcher. The information collected may not benefit you directly. The information learned in this study may be helpful to others.

Individuals from the Department of Criminal Justice, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the Human Subjects Protection Program Office (HSPPO), and other regulatory agencies may inspect these records. In all other respects, however, the data will be held in confidence to the extent permitted by law. Should the data be published, your identity will not be disclosed.

Taking part in this study is voluntary. By answering interview questions, you agree to take part in this research study. You do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to be in this study you may stop taking part at any time. You will not lose any benefits for which you may qualify.

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about the research study, please contact: Thomas Hughes (502-852-6696)

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may call the Human Subjects Protection Program Office at (502) 852-5188. You can discuss any questions about your rights as a research participant, in private, or with a member of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB is an independent committee made up of people from the University community, staff of the institutions, as well as people from the community not connected with these institutions. The IRB has reviewed this research study.
If you have concerns or complaints about the research or research staff and you do not wish to give your name, you may call 1-877-852-1167. This is a 24-hour hot line answered by people who do not work at the University of Louisville.

Sincerely,
Thomas Hughes
CURRICULUM VITAE

Weston Anderson
Department Of Criminal Justice
University of Louisville
Brigman Hall 106
Phone: (702) 820-6495
Weston.Anderson@Louisville.edu

EDUCATION

2024
PhD, Criminal Justice  University of Louisville
(Expected by May 2024)
Dissertation: Social Undermining Among Police Officers in the United States

2021
Master of Criminal Justice, Weber State University

2019
Bachelor of Science, Sociology with Emphasis in Criminal Justice, Utah State University

ACADEMIC POSITIONS

2021 – Current
Graduate Research/Teaching Assistant, Department of Criminal Justice, University of Louisville

2022 – 2023
Course Coordinator for One Credit Classes
Assigned to create syllabi, set up online classes, grade assignments, assist in lecturing, and help organize guest lecturers

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Course Instruction
University of Louisville

2022 - Current
Crime and Justice in the United States, Fall 2023, Spring 2024
Law Enforcement in the United States, Spring 2024

ACADEMIC PUBLICATIONS

Research in Progress


TECHNICAL REPORTS


PRESENTATIONS

Conference Presentations

Weston Anderson. Cause for Concern: Correctional Officer Misconduct (To be presented at the University of Louisville Graduate Student Regional Research Conference)

Katelyn McMahon and Weston Anderson. A comparison of queer stress factors between White and non-White LGBTQIA2S+ Americans: An invariance test across a confirmatory factor analysis. (To be presented at the University of Louisville Graduate Student Regional Research Conference)

Weston Anderson and Thomas Hughes. Reasons for Social Undermining Among Police Officers: A Qualitative Study. (To be presented at ASC 2024 in San Francisco, CA)


Viviana Andreescu, Branna Humphrey, and Weston Anderson. Longitudinal predictors of intimate partner violence perpetration in a female

Weston Anderson and Kristin Swartz. Does Who We Lean on Matter?: Exploring the Relationships between Social Support and Job Burnout among Probation and Parole Officers, American Society of Criminology, Atlanta, GA.

OTHER PROFESSIONAL POSITIONS

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2021-2023

**What’s Next in My Degree Plan?, 3 sessions**

**RESEARCH EXPERIENCE**

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<td>Department of Criminal Justice, University of Louisville</td>
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<td>2022-Current</td>
<td>Graduate Assistant to Dr. Thomas Hughes</td>
<td>Department of Criminal Justice, University of Louisville</td>
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**TECHNICAL SKILLS**

- Educational Platforms: Blackboard, Canvas
- Statistical Software: SPSS, Stata, ATLAS.ti
- Microsoft Office

**REFERENCES**

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<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Phone</th>
<th>Email</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Thomas Hughes</td>
<td>Professor, Criminal Justice</td>
<td>502-852-6696</td>
<td><a href="mailto:twhugh01@louisville.edu">twhugh01@louisville.edu</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Kristin Swartz</td>
<td>Associate Professor, Criminal</td>
<td>502-852-3240</td>
<td><a href="mailto:kmswar01@louisville.edu">kmswar01@louisville.edu</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Viviana Andreescu</td>
<td>Associate Professor, Criminal</td>
<td>502-852-0378</td>
<td><a href="mailto:v0andr01@louisville.edu">v0andr01@louisville.edu</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Molly Sween</td>
<td>Professor, Criminal Justice</td>
<td>801-626-7293</td>
<td><a href="mailto:mollysween@weber.edu">mollysween@weber.edu</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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