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# **An Axe and a Handshake- A Scoping Review of the Transition from Public Safety Occupations**

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## **Abstract**

Exiting a public safety occupation (e.g., paramedics, police, firefighters) and entering retirement is unique in many ways. There are heightened risks and demands associated with essential emergency services that involve personal sacrifices and commitment and the absence of this intense role is significant requiring an adjustment. Public safety personnel (PSP) leave their professions for various reasons including age-related retirement and forced retirement due to illness or injury and little is known about their experiences during the transition. The objective of this review is to summarize the existing body of research.

The methodology for scoping reviews outlined in the five-stage framework by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) was followed. Abstract screening of 5,801 papers yielded 128 studies for full-text screening. Forty-five papers were accepted by at least two of three reviewers for data extraction and analysis. High level themes emerged including cumulative impacts, separation from identity and culture, and buffers.

The study found that there is a need for planning and support for those exiting public safety professions. Financial planning is the focus of pre-planning when it exists and applied research is needed to further understand psychosocial risk and protective factors to support the development of acceptable transition strategies and resources.

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The departure from a public safety occupation (e.g., paramedics, police, firefighters) is significant given the intense commitment required while on the job due to a high level of accountability and responsibility essential for emergency services. Many public safety personnel (PSP) are exposed to cumulative trauma throughout the course of their career, work nonstandard hours, and are at risk of physical harm and stress-related illness due to occupational hazards and workloads. PSP transitioning into retirement must not only separate themselves from their role and intense commitment but also manage any accrued health consequences, which influence overall wellbeing. Entry into and exit out of public safety occupations require significant adjustments; however, there is little emphasis on how exit takes shape. As this scoping review illustrates, the transition from public safety occupations is unique and can be difficult for retirees to navigate when there are few tailored supports.

The transition of PSP to retirement has received limited attention by researchers as demonstrated in preliminary database searches showing a diverse focus concentrated on specific public safety sectors (i.e., police, firefighters). It was noted that retirees are often surveyed for their retrospective accounts of active service (e.g., Chiu et al., 2011) rather than their experiences exiting the professions. In a preliminary search, no reviews were found that focused on the transition to retirement for PSP and few reviews surfaced that accounted for the retirement transition in their search strategies. Lacking a coherent body of research on the transition of PSP to retirement, a scoping review was indicated to provide an overview of existing evidence and detect gaps (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). The aim of this review was to summarize what is known about PSP as they transition from public safety work to retirement and other occupations and identify high level themes. This scoping review is foundational in identifying potential risk and protective factors associated with the transition to set agendas for applied research, and inform policy and practice.

Workers leave public safety occupations voluntarily when they complete a full career and are eligible for pensions or when they resign to pursue other career opportunities, and involuntarily through forced retirement including mandatory retirement (age and service-related policies) and medical retirement (illness or injury). The challenges associated with voluntary retirement, which is usually planned, are different from

forced retirement which can be abrupt and exacerbated by illness, injury, or employment disputes. Research using Canadian longitudinal data for the general population has shown that a transition into retirement that is voluntary and at a pre-planned and anticipated time (i.e., “normal” retirement age) is associated with positive outcomes (Latif, 2011), whereas military veterans, limited by injury or illness and a skillset that is not transferrable, have reported considerable challenges (Blackburn, 2017).

PSP are exposed to significantly more trauma than the general public, which can have cumulative effects and the prevalence of mental health disorders related to trauma exposure is high among PSP in active service (Carleton et al., 2020; Regehr et al., 2021). Nontraumatic work stress such as administrative hassles, safety concerns, and workplace confidentiality combined with critical incidents, can also lead to poorer mental health outcomes (Ricciardelli, Carleton, et al., 2020). The cumulative impact of both trauma exposure and nontraumatic work stress over the course of a career compounded by the retirement transition itself as a major life change could have mental health consequences for PSP retirees. It has also been noted that stigma can be a barrier to receiving mental health support during the PSP career with help-seeking wrongly deemed antithetical to the helping role. Although there is evidence that this is changing through awareness and education (MacDermid et al., 2021; Price, 2017), the perception that help-seeking will be seen as a weakness (self-stigma) remains evident in public safety organizations (Grupe, 2023). For retirees experiencing difficulties during the transition, there is a risk that cultural stigma could perpetuate resistance to mental health support.

The perception of organizational support throughout the PSP career has an impact on job satisfaction and mental health (Ricciardelli, Czarnuch, et al., 2020). Due to the significant demands and requirements, there is an expectation of reciprocity and when PSP believe that their contributions are neither supported nor valued by an organization, they feel betrayed (Rodrigues et al., 2023). Morale within the workforce impacts job commitment which is critical for the organization and partly influenced by member recognition and organizational support related to retirement policies, particularly for those forced into early retirement by job-related illness or injury (Hilal & Litsey, 2020).

Aspects of public safety careers and the nature of exits make the transition to retirement for this population unique and challenging, a premise that has been expanded on in this scoping review. Themes emerged that set the groundwork to understand the transition process and highlight risk and protective factors. The methods used to guide the scoping review and the process followed are described in detail in the methods section followed by the results and a discussion of both high level themes and sub-themes. Gaps and limitations, a key feature of scoping reviews, were expressly stated in the research emphasizing the novelty of this area of inquiry and are summarized. Lastly, implications for research, policy, and practice are discussed along with a brief conclusion.

## Method

The methodology for scoping reviews outlined in the five-stage framework by Arksey and O’Malley (2005) was applied as follows.

### Identifying the Research Question

The research asked: *What does existing literature tell us about the experiences of PSP as they transition from the public safety career to retirement or other employment?* The concept of “retirement” was applied broadly indicating a permanent departure from public safety work for any reason (e.g., forced: mandatory, illness, or injury; voluntary: age-related normative, early retirement, resignation), and inclusive of both those who exit the paid workforce and those who leave to pursue other employment.

### Identifying Relevant Studies

Search strategies were developed in consultation with two librarians, one within social science and the other within health science, to compare database suggestions and search strategies. To access a wider range of databases, online searches were conducted through three universities. Seven online databases underwent

title and abstract searches including: Academic Search Premier, Criminal Justice Database, SocINDEX, PsycINFO, MEDLINE, CINAHL, and PTSDpubs. The librarians assisted with the piloting of search strategies to refine keywords that would include a range of public safety sectors (see Figure 1) and target those who have transitioned (e.g., “retired” or “quit”) from PSP careers. Reference lists from selected studies were also hand-searched for relevant studies not identified in the database searches. The search was international but limited to articles published in English with no limitations on the date or type of publication. The inclusion of grey literature allowed for a more comprehensive search (Pedersen & Tingleff, 2024) ensuring that insights from reports, trade journals, and emerging scholars (i.e., dissertations) were incorporated. The articles yielded from the combined database searches were imported into Covidence (<https://www.covidence.org>), a software program that supports the screening process.

### Figure 1

#### *Boolean Search String*

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(“ambulance attendant\*” OR “ambulance worker\*” OR “border service\*” OR “coast guard\*” OR “communications officer\*” OR constable\* OR “correctional officer\*” OR “correctional personnel” OR “correctional service\*” OR corrections OR “deputy chief\*” OR detective\* OR dispatcher\* OR “emergency medical respon\*” OR “emergency medical service\*” OR “emergency medical technician\*” OR “emergency personnel” OR “emergency respon\*” OR “fire and rescue\*” OR “fire fighters” OR “fire inspector\*” OR firefighters OR “first responder” OR OR hazmat OR “high angle rescue” OR “indigenous emergency manager” OR “law enforcement” OR “marine rescue\*” OR mountie\* OR “operational intelligence personnel” OR paramedic\* OR “parole officer\*” OR police OR “prison guard” OR “prison staff” OR “probation officer” OR “public safety communicator\*” OR “public safety officer” OR “public safety personnel” OR “r c m p” OR “rapid response team” OR rcmp OR “red serge” OR remand\* OR “rescue personnel” OR “search and rescue” OR “tactical population\*” OR “volunteer emergency service\*” OR “911 dispatchers”).ab.ti.  
AND  
(retire\* OR retiring or resign\* OR quit OR “leave the\* job”).ab.ti.

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### Study Selection

Inclusion criteria was refined for abstract screening. Articles were included that focused on workers from any public safety sector who had left the profession; health workers (i.e., emergency in hospital) and military personnel (except Canadian coast guard and RCMP) were excluded. The study sample or target population was either preretirement (perceptions or pre-planning) or retired from a public safety profession. In cases where PSP were preretirement, the reference to retirement was explicitly stated. Forced retirement including mandatory and medical retirement, as well as voluntary retirement including age-related normative retirement, early retirement, and resignations were relevant contextual factors. Articles that explicitly addressed psychosocial aspects of the transition were the focus and epidemiological studies, policy briefs, and retrospective retiree accounts directed at recruitment and retention were excluded. Based on the inclusion criteria, abstracts were independently screened by two reviewers to determine which articles would move to full-text screening with conflicts resolved by a third reviewer.

### Charting the Data

The articles selected for full-text screening were entered into a table including the author(s), title, journal, year of publication, country, peer-review or grey literature, sector represented, retirement status (preretirement, retired), type of retirement (forced, medical, mandatory, voluntary, voluntary early, resignation), aim of the article, research design, findings, and themes. This charting method standardized data extraction for full-text screening and aided the review process. Further discussions ensued between reviewers to refine inclusion and exclusion criteria and studies were removed when there was consensus between at

least two of three reviewers. The remaining articles were exported to MAXQDA (<https://www.maxqda.com>), qualitative data analysis software, for full-text analysis.

**Collating, Summarizing and Reporting the Results**

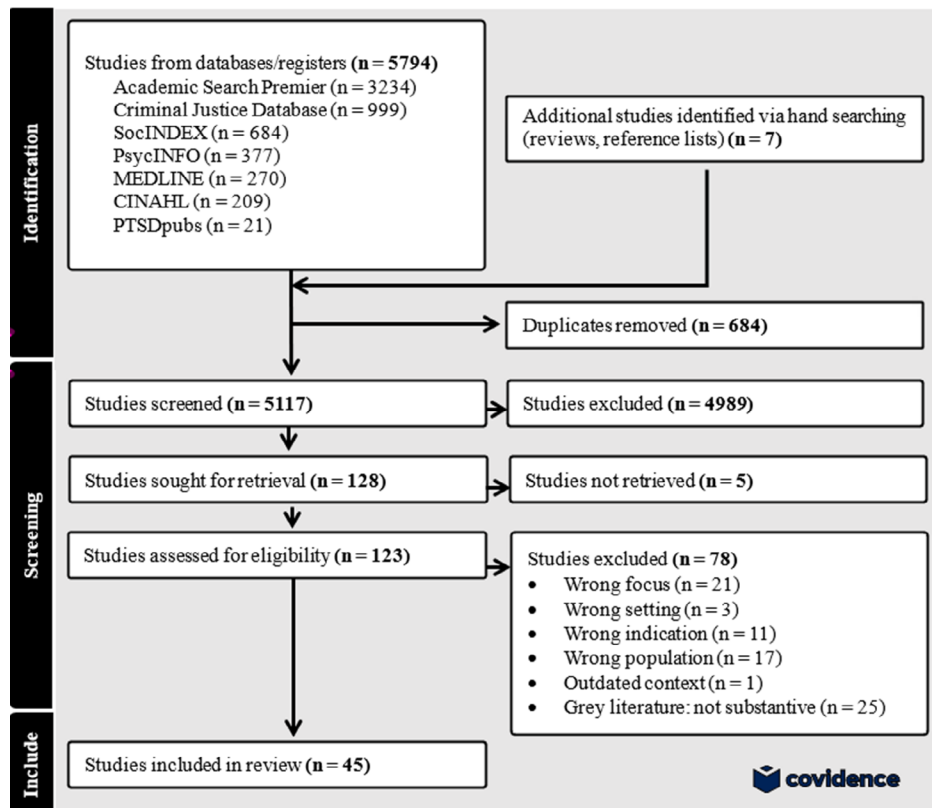
Analysis of the selected articles was facilitated by coding excerpts from the text and categorizing the themes and sub-themes that emerged in accordance with the research question. Visual tools in MAXQDA were used to illustrate connections and conceive high level themes. Summaries of the themes, sub-themes, and variables (i.e. publication date, sample) were merged into a report for reference and further analysis.

**Results**

Database and hand searches of titles and abstracts yielded 5,801 articles. Abstract screening reduced this number to 128 for full-text screening and consensus was reached to include 45 articles for full-text analysis (see PRISMA flow diagram in Figure 2). The majority of the selected articles were published in the last ten years (76%), spanned eight countries including the United States (44%), United Kingdom, Canada, Australia (11%), India, Israel, Nigeria, and Sweden. The peer-reviewed articles (71%) included quantitative (13), qualitative (10), and mixed methods studies (5) and reviews (3). Grey literature (29%) included public safety trade journals, PhD dissertations, and one report. Only a few articles focused on emergency service or first responders generally (13%) with the majority centred on the police sector (62%), firefighters (22%), and one study on paramedics. Samples used in the peer-reviewed research, PhD dissertations, and one report mostly surveyed those who had left a public safety profession (75%); six studies included both PSP preretired and retired; three studies interviewed PSP who were near retirement; and two quantitative studies compared PSP retirees with non-emergency retirees.

**Figure 2**

*PRISMA Flow Diagram*



In the course of thematic analysis, three high-level themes emerged to encapsulate a range of themes and sub-themes developed through the coding process. There was a focus on the cumulative and lasting occupational impacts that influence retirement wellbeing; the effects of separation from an occupational identity and culture; and the buffers that were linked to positive transitions and outcomes. There were also suggestions by study participants and conclusions made by authors regarding how to move forward, which is discussed in the implications section. An author index in Table 1 shows the sample, methodology, and related sub-themes for each of the included studies and Figure 3 presents the central themes and related sub-themes.

**Table 1**

*Author Index of Samples and Themes*

Authors	Sample/Methodology	Sub-Themes
Alvarez et al., 2007	firefighters (retired after 9/11) interviews with counsellors. mixed methods	financial security, loss of peer support, over-identification, stigma, transition programs
Antonellis, 2007	firefighters grey literature	continuing connections, financial security, over-identification, stigma
Black et al., 2013	police retirees n=972 quantitative	career satisfaction, mental health, over-identification, ongoing threats, physical health, screening, trauma exposure, work-family conflict
Blackmon, 2014	police retirees n=226 grey literature: dissertation	adjusting to civilian culture, bridge employment, loss of peer support, maladaptive coping, mental health, over-identification, occupational symbols, pre-planning, social support
Bracken-Scally & McGilloway, 2016	firefighter retirees n=10 qualitative	career satisfaction, family wellbeing, financial security, leisure interests, loss of peer support, over-identification, ongoing mental health support, pre-planning, stigma, trauma exposure, work-family conflict
Bracken-Scally et al., 2014	firefighter retirees n=114; ambulance retirees n =55; non-emergency retirees n=140 quantitative	bridge employment, continuing connections, leisure interests, loss of peer support, ongoing mental health support, physical health, screening, trauma exposure
Bracken-Scally et al., 2016	firefighter preretirement n=6; ambulance preretirement n=8 qualitative	financial security, gradual transition, loss of peer support, maladaptive coping, over-identification, ongoing mental health support, pre-planning, screening
Brandl & Smith, 2013	police n=452; non-emergency n=6,873 quantitative	bridge employment, loss of peer support, maladaptive coping, over-identification, ongoing mental health support, physical health, pre-planning
Brister, 2010	police retirees n=29 grey literature: dissertation	maladaptive coping, over-identification
Bullock, Fielding, et al., 2020	police retirees n=460 mixed methods	abandonment, adjusting to civilian culture, bridge employment, financial security, leisure interests, mental health, over-identification, pre-planning



Continued... Author Index of Samples and Themes

Authors	Sample/Methodology	Sub-Themes
Bullock, Garland, et al., 2020	police retirees n=30 mixed methods	abandonment, exit recognition, financial security, gradual transition, loss of peer support, over-identification, pre-planning, stigma
Cameron & Griffiths, 2017	police retirees n=9 qualitative	abandonment, bridge employment, financial security, leisure interests, loss of peer support, mental health, over-identification, pre-planning
Carney et al., 2021	police retirees n=20 qualitative	bridge employment, family wellbeing, financial security, leisure interests, loss of peer support, over-identification, social support, work-family conflict
Charman & Tyson, 2023	police retirees n=27 qualitative	abandonment, adjusting to civilian culture, loss of peer support, mental health, over-identification, work-family conflict
Conn, 2015	preretirement n=13; police n=7; firefighters n=3; other emergency n=3 qualitative	adjusting to civilian culture, financial security, leisure interests, loss of peer support, over-identification, ongoing mental health support, pre-planning, social support,
Craft, 2019	police retirees n=10 grey literature: dissertation	adjusting to civilian culture, bridge employment, loss of peer support, maladaptive coping, over-identification, physical health, pre-planning, social support, stigma, trauma exposure, work-family conflict
Dopelt et al., 2019	preretirement n=333; retirees n=200; interviews (retirees) n=15 mixed methods	abandonment, mental health, over-identification, physical health, trauma exposure, work-family conflict
Easterbrook et al., 2022	focus groups (retirees/preretirement) paramedics n=9; police n=19; firefighters n=6; military n=10; correctional officers n=10; other n=7 qualitative	abandonment, adjusting to civilian culture, loss of peer support, over-identification, trauma exposure
Forcese & Cooper, 1985	police preretirement phone interviews n=183; mailed questionnaires n=117 mixed methods	bridge employment, financial security, leisure interests, pre-planning, stigma
Harvey et al., 2016	firefighters n=488; firefighter retirees n=265 quantitative	maladaptive coping, mental health, over-identification, ongoing mental health support, screening, trauma exposure
Hill et al., 2015	police retirees n=211 quantitative	bridge employment
Hudson, 2017	firefighter retirees grey literature	continuing connections, loss of peer support, maladaptive coping, mental health, transition programs, work-family conflict

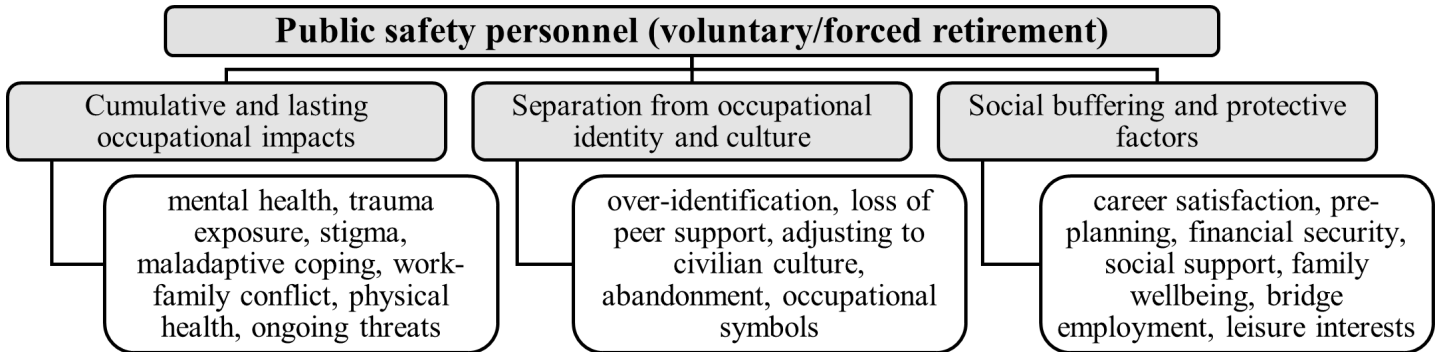
*Continued... Author Index of Samples and Themes*

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Sample/Methodology</b>	<b>Sub-Themes</b>
Jones, 2022	police retirees n=19 grey literature: dissertation	adjusting to civilian culture, bridge employment, career satisfaction, exit recognition, family wellbeing, financial security, gradual transition, leisure interests, loss of peer support, maladaptive coping, over-identification, pre-planning, resilience training
Kelsey, 2022	police retirees n=10 grey literature: dissertation	bridge employment, family wellbeing, loss of peer support, maladaptive coping, mental health, over-identification, pre-planning, screening, stigma
Kragt, 2019	firefighter retirees n=8 firefighter preretirement n=32 mixed methods	bridge employment, career satisfaction, family wellbeing, financial security, gradual transition, leisure interests, loss of peer support, over-identification, physical health, pre-planning, work-family conflict
Lawn et al., 2020	paramedics, ambulance, volunteers, call-takers review - 39 articles	abandonment, over-identification, ongoing mental health support, screening, stigma, trauma exposure
Olofsson, 2013	firefighter retirees n=10 qualitative	continuing connections, family wellbeing, over-identification, social support, work-family conflict
Ozee, 2001	police retirees n=140 grey literature: dissertation	bridge employment, family wellbeing, loss of peer support, mental health, over-identification
Parnaby & Broll, 2021	police retirees n=932 quantitative	career satisfaction, family wellbeing, financial security, over-identification, trauma exposure
Parnaby & Weston, 2020a	police retirees n=45 qualitative	over-identification, occupational symbols
Parnaby & Weston, 2020b	police retirees n=45 qualitative	exit recognition, over-identification
Patterson et al., 2001	police retirees n=108 police retiree interviews n=20 mixed methods	abandonment, family wellbeing, financial security, maladaptive coping, mental health, over-identification, ongoing threats, pre-planning, screening, trauma exposure
Pepper et al., 2022	firefighter retirees n=315 quantitative	financial security, loss of peer support, maladaptive coping, mental health, over-identification, physical health, resilience training, trauma exposure
Pignataro, 2013	firefighters grey literature	mental health, stigma, transition programs, trauma exposure
Pole et al., 2006	police retirees n=21 quantitative	abandonment, continuing connections, family wellbeing, loss of peer support, mental health, screening, trauma exposure, work-family conflict

*Continued... Author Index of Samples and Themes*

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Sample/Methodology</b>	<b>Sub-Themes</b>
Robicheau, 2004	police retirees grey literature: dissertation	bridge employment, exit recognition, financial security, over-identification, pre-planning, stigma
Ruiz & Morrow, 2005	police retirees review	adjusting to civilian culture, career satisfaction, financial security, loss of peer support, maladaptive coping, mental health, over-identification, occupational symbols, ongoing mental health support, screening, stigma, work-family conflict
Singh et al., 2022	police retirees n=30; police preretirement n=30 quantitative	over-identification, mental health
Smith et al., 2021	first responders review - 56 articles	adjusting to civilian culture, mental health, occupational symbols, ongoing mental health support, resilience training, stigma, transition programs, trauma exposure
Sunderland, 2014	police retirees grey literature: dissertation	abandonment, adjusting to civilian culture, continuing connection, financial security, loss of peer support, over-identification, occupational symbols, stigma, transition programs
Testoff et al., 2022	firefighter retirees n=446; firefighter preretirement n=54 quantitative	mental health, trauma exposure
Tufano, 2018	police retirees n=204 grey literature: dissertation	adjusting to civilian culture, over-identification
Tuohy et al., 2005	police retirees n=1,334 quantitative	bridge employment, mental health, screening
Umukoro & Adejuwon, 2017	police retirees n=230 quantitative	career satisfaction, family wellbeing, financial security, loss of peer support, over-identification, physical health, pre-planning, social support
Violanti et al., 2011	police preretirement n=2,075 police retirees n=1,153 quantitative	mental health



**Figure 3***Themes and Sub-themes*

### Cumulative and Lasting Occupational Impacts

#### *Trauma Exposure*

PSP retirees have had significantly more lifetime experiences of trauma and report more PTSD symptoms than the general population (Black et al., 2013; Bracken-Scally et al., 2014; Craft, 2019; Lawn et al., 2020; Pepper et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2021) underscoring the cumulative and long-term consequences of trauma exposure to health and wellbeing. Retirees in Bracken-Scally et al. (2014) experienced symptoms from traumatic events that had occurred an average of 19 years prior and PSP often exhibited symptoms of PTSD through vivid recall (Bracken-Scally & McGilloway, 2016; Pignataro, 2013), nightmares, and hypervigilance (Pepper et al., 2022). Police retirees in Craft (2019) responded to sounds and smells, “like popping sounds (gunfire), and shuffling or the sound of fast movement (fighting and attackers) ... the smell of blood, or dead bodies ... it just doesn’t go away” (p. 93). PSP have higher rates of diagnosed PTSD compared to the general public (Bracken-Scally et al., 2014; Pepper et al., 2022), with retirees, in some cases, reporting higher rates than those currently serving (Harvey et al., 2016) corresponding to cumulative trauma exposure over the course of a career (Bracken-Scally et al., 2014; Harvey et al., 2016). Retirees with PTSD often retired early (Black et al., 2013; Patterson et al., 2001), struggled with the retirement transition, and reported more stress, anxiety, depression (Black et al., 2013; Harvey et al., 2016; Pepper et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2021), and sleep difficulties (Testoff et al., 2022).

Many PSP retirees reported experiencing symptoms of PTSD, depression, anxiety, and stress, with medical retirees reporting higher levels of these symptoms than those who retired voluntarily (Black et al., 2013; Blackmon, 2014). Forced and unplanned exits presented additional challenges including poorer mental health, as well as conflicts with spouses/partners (Cameron & Griffiths, 2017). Smith et al. (2021) noted that “[t]he unpredictable nature, cumulative stress, and fast-paced tempo associated with front-line first response can result in an inability to appropriately debrief, and therefore process, work experiences” (p. 475). Neglecting cumulative stress related to both critical incidents and nontraumatic routine events at times resulted in early retirement (Alvarez et al., 2007; Charman & Tyson, 2023; Dopelt et al., 2019; Kelsey, 2022; Ozee, 2001; Pole et al., 2006) and reportedly affected health and wellbeing in retirement (Lawn et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2021).

**Suicide.** Higher rates of suicide have been reported among firefighter (Pepper et al., 2022) and police retirees (Ruiz & Morrow, 2005) compared to the general population in the United States. Following several suicides among firefighters in the United States, Pignataro (2013) noted that it is not uncommon for firefighters to experience depression or anxiety after a traumatic event and the recall and the associated feelings years after these events can have an impact on retirees. Suicidal ideation for firefighter retirees is sometimes associated with painful memories resulting from trauma exposure. As Hudson (2017) noted “the

quietness of the new schedule allows these memories to resurface ... some refer to this season of remembering as “dancing with ghosts” (p. 47). Poor health, and the loss of peer support are additional risk factors for suicide associated with the transition (Hudson, 2017).

### ***Stigma***

PSP retirees, not anticipating the challenges associated with the transition, do not always seek help when they experience difficulties due to skepticism and stigma associated with mental health programs (Alvarez et al., 2007). Antonellis (2007) noted that job-related psychological injuries are often misunderstood, and medical retirees can be perceived or perceive themselves through a self-stigmatizing lens as “damaged goods” (Antonellis, 2007, p. 92). In one study, those who retired early with invisible psychological injuries had more difficulty transitioning, felt isolated from coworkers, and not supported by the organization compared to those who retired with physical injuries (Bullock, Garland, et al., 2020). When stigma deters or delays help seeking within public safety organizations, it diminishes opportunities for early interventions, putting retirees at risk of cumulative long-term consequences (Lawn et al., 2020).

### ***Maladaptive Coping***

One quarter of firefighter retirees surveyed in the United States reported alcohol or substance abuse disorders (Pepper et al., 2022) and smoking and alcohol dependency were identified as significant risks for police retirees, related to poor overall health (Ruiz & Morrow, 2005). Patterson et al. (2001) found that medical retirees smoked and were dependent on alcohol more than voluntary retirees. Maladaptive coping strategies such as alcohol misuse that persist into retirement, increase the risk of age-related health issues (e.g., cancer, diabetes).

Maladaptive responses prompted by occupational culture and heightened job demands contributed to poor health outcomes for PSP retirees (Blackmon, 2014; Brandl & Smith, 2013; Brister, 2010; Craft, 2019; Harvey et al., 2016; Hudson, 2017; Jones, 2022; Kelsey, 2022; Patterson et al., 2001; Ruiz & Morrow, 2005) and higher morbidity and premature death within the police sector in particular (Brandl & Smith, 2013). As Ruiz and Morrow (2005) note, police departments can be insular and “as a result, they [officers] lose the capacity to enable constructive coping skills when faced with stressful situations” (p. 1162). The prevalence of alcohol misuse is associated with trauma exposure, with higher rates found among firefighter retirees compared to those in active service and corresponding to an increase in the number of critical incidents reported (Harvey et al., 2016). Harvey et al. (2016) concluded that the loss of occupational identity and peer support combined with an occupational culture that endorses maladaptive coping cumulatively contributed to a prevalence of mental disorders among firefighter retirees.

### ***Physical Health***

PSP retirees reported lower satisfaction with physical health than non-emergency workers (Bracken-Scally et al., 2014). Studies have shown that police retirees die at a younger age compared to other public service retirees (Brandl & Smith, 2013) and many retirees experience health issues, including poor physical health, that develop post-transition (Black et al., 2013). Black et al. (2013) proposed that this prevalence is related to chronic demands during active service that postpone treatment and foster a pattern of neglect. The physical demands of the job were a key factor in early retirement for Israeli paramedics (Dopelt et al., 2019) and police in England and Wales (Bullock, Fielding, et al., 2020). The lingering effects of duty-related injuries such as arthritis and depression can limit retirees’ activities of daily living, leisure activities, and overall wellbeing (Bullock, Fielding, et al., 2020; Craft, 2019; Umukoro & Adejuwon, 2017). Higher physical pain was also associated with more psychological dysfunction (Pepper et al., 2022). Sleep-related issues, including insomnia, impaired memory, and emotional regulation, were also found to be common among PSP retirees, particularly those with PTSD (Cameron & Griffiths, 2017; Pepper et al., 2022; Testoff et al., 2022).

### **Work-Family Conflict**

Retirees reported that their public safety career was often incompatible with family life and work demands were given priority at the expense of family relationships (Bracken-Scally & McGilloway, 2016; Carney et al., 2021; Charman & Tyson, 2023; Dopelt et al., 2019; Olofsson, 2013) which, in some cases, precipitated early retirement (Charman & Tyson, 2023; Dopelt et al., 2019). For some retirees, the transition allowed more family time and the opportunity to reconnect (Bracken-Scally & McGilloway, 2016; Carney et al., 2021; Craft, 2019; Hudson, 2017; Jones, 2022; Kelsey, 2022; Kragt, 2019; Ozee, 2001). For others, the prioritization of careers had consequences in retirement such as divorce (Carney et al., 2021; Craft, 2019) which was more common among retirees with PTSD (Black et al., 2013) and was linked to suicidal ideation (Hudson, 2017; Ruiz & Morrow, 2005).

### **Separation from Occupational Identity and Culture**

PSP retirees have described unique aspects of public safety work including combined physical demands, trauma exposure, stressful and hazardous conditions, unpredictability, and shiftwork that made their work distinct from other occupations (Bracken-Scally & McGilloway, 2016). The transition to retirement is described as a “disruptive process” when everything comes to an “abrupt halt” (Bullock, Garland, et al., 2020, p. 8). As one retiree said: “It was like going from one extreme to the other. One day you’re going out, you don’t know what’s going to happen, you could be shot ... anything could happen. The next day it’s nothing, there’s absolutely nothing” (p. 8).

The critical function and all-consuming persistent nature of public safety professions has the effect of diminishing other identities by thwarting other interests and opportunities to socialize outside the organization (Conn, 2015; Umukoro & Adejuwon, 2017). The intensity of the work role reinforces the work identity, making it difficult for retirees to develop other identities (e.g., new job, family, other interests); consequently, the transition requires conscious effort and time (Parnaby & Weston, 2020b).

Due to the persistence of the work identity, even those who plan their retirement experience some challenges separating from the work culture and relinquishing their work roles. Retirees in the studies experienced role residual, which is defined as continued identification with a former role (Ebaugh, 1988). As one interviewee explained, “I find myself correcting people at my [new] job, and I have to take a step back and say I’m not a cop anymore” (Jones, 2022, p. 68). Parnaby and Weston (2020a) reported that some police retirees recognized the incongruity between their past and present roles and made concerted efforts to change their behaviours. PSP retirees are particularly susceptible to role residual during the transition because, in their new non-work role, they can be exposed to the same contexts in their communities that they responded to in their work role (e.g., accidents, medical emergencies) erroneously eliciting an activation of their former work identity. Abandoning the role as a “helping professional”, a valued aspect of the job, required significant adjustments (Bracken-Scally & McGilloway, 2016; Kelsey, 2022). As Parnaby and Weston (2020a) noted, “emotions, thoughts, and behaviours while on the job do not vanish when the retirement threshold is crossed” (p. 239). Jones (2022) noted, however, that role residual generally decreased over time as retirees acclimated to different roles.

Loss of authority and respect from coworkers and the public was identified and, in some cases, linked to a lack of purpose (Bracken-Scally et al., 2016; Brandl & Smith, 2013; Bullock, Fielding, et al., 2020; Cameron & Griffiths, 2017; Jones, 2022; Parnaby & Broll, 2021; Ruiz & Morrow, 2005; Sunderland, 2014; Tufano, 2018). Senior ranking police retirees forced to retire found that being stripped of their authority and an inability to influence outcomes stood in stark contrast to their prior role (Cameron & Griffiths, 2017). A retiree in Cameron and Griffiths (2017) described his experience in this way: “You are a person of influence, a person that can really contribute because things you say do, authorise, make a difference to someone somewhere, either a member of the organization or the public. ... Now I am just a bloke sitting at home” (p. 57).

### ***Over-Identification***

The loss of identity for PSP retirees was noted in much of the literature with issues arising when the work identity had been prioritized over personal relationships and interests due to the intensity of roles and responsibilities. Charman and Tyson (2023) cite the incompatibility of work and non-work identities (e.g., police versus parent) as a reason for early retirement (i.e., resignations). For retirees who have maintained an organizational commitment throughout their careers and sidelined non-work identities, it can be more difficult to transition (Charman & Tyson, 2023; Conn et al., 2015).

Firefighters who had a strong commitment to the organization described being emotionally unprepared for retirement despite gradual and planned transitions (Kragt, 2019). Conn et al. (2015) interviewed PSP who were eligible to retire but reluctant to do so and found that “many participants feared a possible self without meaning” (p. 52). An officer in Conn et al. (2015) commented, “you lose a little bit of your identity I suppose ... you’re not a police officer ... people aren’t really interested in how many times you had to cut your lawn last month” (p. 52). The loss of a “sense of mission”, the capacity to help, and collegiality among frontline workers, elements absent in many other professions, were expressed as regrets by Israeli paramedics who had resigned (Dopelt et al., 2019).

Retirees described their work as a vocation and were committed to the goals of the professions and roles as “helping professionals” and valued their relationships with coworkers (Bracken-Scally & McGilloway, 2016; Bullock, Garland, et al., 2020; Charman & Tyson, 2023; Craft, 2019; Jones, 2022). These jobs were often referenced as “a way of life” (Bracken-Scally & McGilloway, 2016; Brandl & Smith, 2013; Bullock, Garland, et al., 2020) and retirement meant not being part of the team and losing the ability to carry out the mission of the organization.

### ***Loss of Peer Support***

Solidarity and bonding among PSP have been attributed to hazardous working conditions requiring a cohesive workforce which promotes collective pride, loyalty, and commitment (Brandl & Smith, 2013; Bullock, Garland, et al., 2020; Charman & Tyson, 2023). There are repeated references to the workforce as a “family” (Brandl & Smith, 2013; Bullock, Garland, et al., 2020; Charman & Tyson, 2023) or “brotherhood” (Blackmon, 2014; Brandl & Smith, 2013; Conn et al., 2015; Craft, 2019; Easterbrook et al., 2022; Hudson, 2017; Ozee, 2001; Pepper et al., 2022; Ruiz & Morrow, 2005); however, as Bullock, Garland et al. (2020) found, these relationships are confined to the workplace, “... leav[ing] former officers without the support networks they had previously benefited from and so potentially vulnerable at this new stage of their lives” (p. 19). The loss of camaraderie in retirement can be profound for those who have not extended their network of social support beyond the workplace (Conn et al., 2015; Craft, 2019).

### ***Adjusting to Civilian Culture***

Worker camaraderie can extend to an *us versus them* discourse to entrench work roles and status and maintain solidarity among the ingroup (Charman & Tyson, 2023). This can help organizations build morale and compliance; however, this can also have a negative impact on retirees who find themselves no longer part of the ingroup (Conn et al., 2015). A culture of us versus them makes it difficult for PSP retirees to transition into civilian life; a loss of belonging and support and feelings of isolation and abandonment were reported by many retirees (Carney et al., 2021; Craft, 2019; Pole et al., 2006; Sunderland, 2014; Umukoro & Adejuwon, 2017). Becoming an “outsider” was reflected on as a loss of mattering or a *relevance deficit* (Cameron & Griffiths, 2017; Carney et al., 2021; Craft, 2019) which was described by some as a crisis, though short-lived, requiring a significant adjustment (Bracken-Scally & McGilloway, 2016; Carney et al., 2021).



## ***Abandonment***

Retirement “celebrations” vary from small gatherings to banquets for those with higher ranks (Parnaby & Weston, 2020b), with some retirees reporting no rituals other than a trail of paperwork (Jones, 2022; Robicheau, 2004). Exit interviews, when they were provided, were described as “brief and impersonal” (Robicheau, 2004, p.4) with some feeling slighted by a lack of recognition after many years of service (Bullock, Garland, et al., 2020; Jones, 2022). The routine procedures in place to collect the property angered some retirees and was met with resistance (Parnaby & Weston, 2020a; Smith et al., 2021). The process of returning property designated for active service such as a badge or radio, items that serve to distinguish PSP from the public, had an impact symbolizing the loss of authority and professional identity (Blackmon, 2014; Parnaby & Weston, 2020a; Ruiz & Morrow, 2005; Sunderland, 2014).

Medical retirees commented on a sense of betrayal from the organization, “...they squeeze as much out of you as they can, then when you break, they just throw you away” (Easterbrooks et al., 2013, p. 256). Retirees coping with physical injuries felt abandoned due to a lack of support for the sudden transition (Bullock, Fielding, et al., 2020). A “perceived breach of psychological contract” was an overarching theme in Cameron and Griffiths (2017) for senior officers forced to retire in the United Kingdom. Transitioning into retirement unexpectedly poses obvious challenges for financial stability and family welfare; however, it was abandonment despite years of service involving personal sacrifices, dedication, and risks that was linked to retirees’ distress (Cameron & Griffiths, 2017).

## **Buffers For Positive Transitions And Outcomes**

### ***Career Satisfaction***

Perceptions of career success and job satisfaction were linked to a positive retirement adjustment (Bracken-Scally & McGilloway, 2016; Kragt, 2019; Parnaby & Broll, 2021; Umukoro & Adejuwon, 2017). Despite the dangers and demands of public safety professions, retirees reported that they valued their careers and did not regret their choices (Black et al., 2013; Jones, 2022). Longer service and voluntary retirement (i.e., age-related normative transitions) were each linked to career satisfaction, and more years of service correlated with better psychological functioning in retirement (Pepper et al., 2022) and lower suicide rates (Violanti et al., 2011).

### ***Pre-planning***

Retirees who had plans in place and focused on the opportunity to enter a new stage in their lives either by changing careers or developing other interests experienced an easier transition (Bullock, Fielding, et al., 2020; Conn et al., 2015; Hudson, 2017; Kelsey, 2022). For those who retired voluntarily, planning was identified as a key factor in supporting the transition and supported health and wellbeing (Blackmon, 2014; Bracken-Scally & McGilloway, 2016; Bracken-Scally et al., 2016; Brandl & Smith, 2013; Jones, 2022; Kelsey, 2022; Kragt, 2019; Robicheau, 2004). Pre-planning allowed retirees to anticipate change, develop realistic expectations, establish meaningful goals, and have agency in the process and outcomes (Bracken-Scally et al., 2016; Craft, 2019; Kelsey, 2022; Patterson et al., 2001; Robicheau, 2004; Umukoro & Adejuwon, 2017).

### ***Financial Security***

Financial security was a significant factor in subjective wellbeing (Bracken-Scally & McGilloway, 2016; Carney et al., 2021; Parnaby & Broll, 2021; Umukoro & Adejuwon, 2017). Both financial planning and adjustments are needed as workers exit the security of paid employment (Eagers, 2019; Hansson et al., 2019). Financial issues were prominent in the research as a source of worry during the transition for both planned and unplanned exits, particularly when there were health issues and dependents (Bracken-Scally et al., 2016; Carney et al., 2021; Kragt, 2019; Ruiz & Morrow, 2005). Medical retirees reported financial difficulties

associated with fewer years of service and reduced pensions, which contributed to poorer psychological wellbeing (Bullock, Fielding, et al., 2020; Cameron & Griffiths, 2017; Patterson et al., 2001; Pepper et al., 2022).

### ***Social Support***

**Peers.** Many retirees reported missing coworkers and had little if any contact with them in retirement (Alvarez et al., 2007; Bracken-Scally et al., 2016; Carney et al., 2021; Craft, 2019; Hudson, 2017; Jones, 2022; Kelsey, 2022; Kragt, 2019; Pole et al., 2006). Higher ranking officers were more apt to maintain relationships with peers than lower ranks, which provided support during the transition (Kragt, 2019; Ozee, 2001). Establishing friendship networks through community involvement helped mitigate the absence of coworkers and a *relevance deficit* experienced by some retirees during the transition (Carney et al., 2021).

**Family.** Family wellbeing was identified as an important resilience factor linked to retirees' subjective wellbeing (Carney et al., 2021; Parnaby & Broll, 2021). Opportunities to spend time with adult children and grandchildren were specifically noted and the absence of occupational stress helped retirees reconnect with families (Bracken-Scally & McGilloway, 2016; Carney et al., 2021; Kelsey, 2022; Umukoro & Adejuwon, 2017). Patterson et al. (2021) found that retirees who reported more family cohesion with structure and predictability reported less distress during the transition. Retirees in Carney et al. (2021) stated that relationships with spouses had improved after a period of adjustment and marital stability was related to positive outcomes for retirees (Bracken-Scally & McGilloway, 2016; Ozee, 2001; Pole et al., 2006).

### ***Bridge Employment***

Community involvement whether through volunteer or paid work served as a validation of retirees' abilities (Cameron & Griffiths, 2017) and extended social support which helped mitigate the *relevance deficit* and loss of camaraderie (Carney et al., 2021). PSP retirees who engaged in paid work or voluntary work rated higher in quality-of-life measures (Bracken-Scally et al., 2014) and reported a more positive transition experience (Carney et al., 2021; Jones, 2022; Ozee, 2001). Many retirees acquired bridge employment, paid work that *bridges* the gap between leaving careers and exiting the labour force altogether (Craft, 2019; Hill et al., 2015; Kelsey, 2022). Bridge employment was viewed by retirees as a positive aspect of retirement acclimation (Kelsey, 2022) and linked to lower levels of anxiety and depression (Tuohy et al., 2005). Securing paid employment instilled confidence (Cameron & Griffiths, 2017) and a sense of self-efficacy and control (Blackmon, 2014; Robicheau, 2004). Bridge employment was described as a way to stay active and connect with people and also a necessity for those who retired before they were eligible for their full pension (Jones, 2022). Hill et al. (2015) noted that opportunities for bridge employment encourages workers to retire voluntarily versus the organization invoking mandatory retirement and facilitates a gradual labour force exit. There are, however, challenges securing bridge employment due to limitations in transferable skills (Brandl & Smith, 2013; Cameron & Griffiths, 2017; Forcese & Cooper, 1985; Kelsey, 2022; Kragt, 2019) and health issues associated with medical retirement (Bullock, Fielding, et al., 2020).

### ***Leisure Interests***

For those who leave the professions voluntarily and do not pursue bridge employment, having leisure interests has contributed positively to transition and retirement outcomes (Bracken-Scally & McGilloway, 2016; Cameron & Griffiths, 2017; Carney et al., 2021; Forcese & Cooper, 1985; Jones, 2022; Kragt, 2019; Umukoro & Adejuwon, 2017). Retirees reported enjoying the freedom and time to participate in activities (hobbies, sports) and socialize (Bracken-Scally & McGilloway, 2016). Engaging in leisure activities and exploring other interests helped some retirees cope with some of the challenges associated with the transition (Jones, 2022). Having pre-retirement leisure interests supported the transition (Kragt, 2019); however,



involvement in leisure activities was dependent on health status and not always an option for retirees with chronic illnesses or injuries (Umukoro & Adejuwon, 2017).

## Implications

### Transition Programs

The transition from public safety occupations has been identified as a significant adjustment (Jones, 2022; Kelsey, 2022) and retirees have emphasized the importance of pre-planning early in one's career (Blackmon, 2014; Jones, 2022; Patterson et al., 2001). The need for planning is underscored by preretirees who expressed discomfort with retirement and felt psychologically unprepared (Conn et al., 2015). Early planning is particularly important for unexpected exits with medical retirees reporting they were unprepared and dissatisfied with the support received (Bullock, Fielding, et al., 2020). Retirees who experience job-related injury or illness need additional support due to the sudden transition and often long and painful recovery (Pignataro, 2013). A general lack of organizational support for the transition was noted by researchers (Lawn et al., 2020; Robicheau, 2004; Smith et al., 2021).

Due to the physical and psychological tolls, hazards, and workloads associated with these essential roles, it is imperative that organizations prioritize the physical and mental wellbeing of PSP throughout careers and into retirement. Ongoing education about mental health, tailored to the professions, as well as policies and procedures to facilitate retirement transitions are needed (Bracken-Scally & McGilloway, 2016; Lawn et al., 2020). A pre-retirement curriculum should include recognition of unique job aspects, strategies for physical and emotional wellbeing, career planning, and investment planning (Robicheau, 2004; Sunderland, 2014). Ongoing resilience training sensitive to the occupational culture, critical incident debriefing, and pre-retirement seminars regarding finances, loss of identity, and separation from police culture are recommended (Jones, 2022; Pepper et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2021). Due to the unique culture associated with these professions, peer support has also been highlighted. Peer supporters are often considered approachable and trusted due to shared experience, can help destigmatize mental health, and serve as a conduit to mental health professionals (Robicheau, 2004; Sunderland, 2014).

There is considerable evidence that ongoing awareness and information is needed to support the psychosocial needs of PSP due to the intensity of the role from entry to exit but little research on how that will take shape (Lawn et al., 2020). Support is needed to enhance a sense of control and self-efficacy by normalizing the process and fostering realistic expectations (Parnaby & Broll, 2021; Robicheau, 2004). Retirees have reported that organizations focus too much on financial planning and neglect the psychological effects concomitant with the transition (Bullock, Garland, et al., 2020; Craft, 2019). Different types of support are presumably indicated for those who retire early and those who retire after thirty years of service. Some will need emotional support to cope with psychological aspects of the separation and change while practical help preparing for new careers might be a priority for others. Robicheau (2004) identified challenges to the implementation of transition programs including funding, resistance to change, stigma, clinicians rejected because they lack public safety sector cultural literacy, and peers rejected because they do not have the professional status of clinicians.

### Screening

Due to work-related risk factors (e.g., trauma exposure), health screening is indicated for PSP focused on early detection and intervention to promote mental and physical wellbeing (Harvey et al., 2016). Screening throughout a career can promote health awareness and lifestyle changes for better outcomes in retirement (Bracken-Scally et al., 2016). It is recommended that screening begin early in careers to assess job-related psychosocial risk factors and foster resiliency (Bracken-Scally et al., 2014). Ongoing trauma screening (Harvey et al., 2016; Lawn et al., 2020; Patterson et al., 2001; Pole et al., 2006) and screening for anxiety and depression for susceptible medical retirees (Black et al., 2013; Tuohy et al., 2005) are needed to facilitate focused and timely interventions. Additionally, extending screening for depression and PTSD to include alcohol

misuse has been recommended (Harvey et al., 2016). Ongoing screening is preventative and facilitates early treatment which benefits workers, organizations, and potentially leads to better outcomes for retirees (Ruiz & Morrow, 2005).

### Gradual Transition

Retirees recommended “gearing down beforehand vs. falling off the edge” (Bullock, Garland, et al., 2020, p. 13) signalling that a gradual exit with reduced hours and workload is preferable to an abrupt exit (Bracken-Scally et al., 2016; Kragt, 2019). A structured and gradual transition to retirement has been identified as beneficial as a general practice as it allows workplaces to retain knowledge and expertise and simultaneously allows employees time to adjust to a new stage in their lives (Eagers et al., 2018). Historically, this has not always been an option in public safety professions (Bracken-Scally et al., 2016); however, more recently, firefighters in Australia who were given a reduced workload preretirement reported that it eased the transition (Kragt, 2019).

### Continuing Connections

It is recommended that organizations establish a retirement community and a network of peers for both workers and families to ease the transition into retirement. Organizational support and recognition given to PSP exiting the profession not only impacts retirees and their families but also affects morale for those in active service (Antonellis, 2007). Continued connections have been facilitated through retired members associations affiliated with public safety organizations that offer peer support and extend social opportunities (Bracken-Scally et al., 2016; Pole et al., 2006). For example, in Lulea, Sweden, firefighter retirees can join a community of retirees who meet weekly in the basement of a firehall, encouraging ongoing camaraderie and maintaining a connection to both the organization and the physical location (Olofsson, 2013). As Pignataro (2013) noted: “We need to get involved with those who are about to retire instead of just giving them an ax or a party” (p.4).

### Encouraging Other Interests

Retirement rituals are often focused on the end of a career rather than the transition to a new phase of life (Bullock, Fielding, et al., 2020; Charman & Tyson, 2023; Robicheau, 2004). Peer support and role models who encourage interests and hobbies outside of work have been identified as an effective means to address the psychological aspects of retirement (Bullock, Fielding, et al., 2020; Conn et al., 2015; Kragt, 2019). Assistance is also needed to enhance knowledge, skills, and abilities to support successful vocational transitions since many PSP retirees engage in bridge employment (Bullock, Fielding, et al., 2020; Hill et al., 2015). The transition into retirement requires attention to the psychological changes, financial implications, future employment, and the development of outside interests. Conn et al. (2015) suggested that policies for compulsory vacation leave and limited overtime are organizational changes that can help workers enrich their personal lives.

### Gaps and Limitations

This scoping review was exploratory due to the lack of a coherent body of research on transitions from public safety occupations; as a result, we decided to include grey literature to best capture current scholarly discourse. Discussions with colleagues and reference librarians supported keyword searches, although it is possible that different keywords would return different results. The authors are confident, however, that the search strategy provided us with a body of literature that is strongly representative of the research question posed, if not exhaustive.

Many public safety sectors are absent in the literature or understudied. It was found that the police sector was overrepresented, followed by firefighters, with only a few studies sampling a mix of sectors. There was also lack of ethnic diversity with participants predominantly identified as “white”. Women were also

underrepresented; however, it is expected that increasing numbers of women in active service will facilitate comparative studies of retirees along gender lines in the future.

A self-selection bias (Parnaby & Broll, 2021) and social-desirability bias (Forcese & Cooper, 1985) were potentially responsible for an overrepresentation of healthy retirees who reported fewer difficulties with the transition. In contrast, Harvey et al. (2016) noted that their research may have had more relevance for those suffering and resulted in an overrepresentation of retirees with health issues.

Researchers identified the need for longitudinal research that looks at preretirement, transition, and post-transition to assess quality of life factors over time (Bracken-Scally et al., 2014). Tuohy et al. (2005) cautioned that cross-sectional studies can indicate cohort effects rather than developmental changes and studies reliant on a retrospective self-reporting are often considered less dependable than cross-sectional accounts (Bernard et al., 1984).

Regarding subject matter, much more research is needed on the psychosocial impacts of separation from workplace culture, work and non-work identities, and sleep patterns (shiftwork) and disruptions (PTSD symptoms).

There was consensus in the peer-reviewed articles that a coherent body of literature on the transition from public safety occupations does not exist; rather, information has been gathered from an array of multiple disciplines. An interdisciplinary rather than multidisciplinary approach is needed to address the complexity of the retirement transition to inform practice for pre-retirement PSP and transitioning retirees.

## Conclusions

Research is limited on the experiences of PSP who leave their occupations. There is a need for planning and support for the transition from public safety occupations. Having a plan, a network of family and friends, bridge employment and/or hobbies and interests, and financial security were resilience-enhancing factors associated with a positive retirement transition.

Financial planning tends to be the focus of pre-planning when it exists. Resources to address issues associated with identity, social support, and the cumulative and long-term effects of trauma exposure are often lacking and critical for the health and wellbeing of workers leaving public safety occupations.

Workers who take ongoing risks throughout their careers for public safety deserve more than an axe and a handshake. An appreciation of the all-consuming nature of public safety occupations and an understanding of the experiences of workers during the retirement transition is needed to develop acceptable transition programs, shape retirement processes and policies, and provide ongoing mental health support to both PSP in active service and retirees.

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