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EDITORIAL MISSION STATEMENT

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The editorial mission statement of the *Journal of Colorado Policing* is to provide a resource of information among law enforcement professionals. The journal serves as a professional forum for the dissemination of original research, legal updates, training strategies as well as best practices and literature reviews. The journal incorporates the expertise of both practitioners and academics to achieve those goals. Promoting the publication of peer-reviewed research and providing sound advice from practitioners for law enforcement within the state of Colorado are the journal's main goals.

The editorial board of the *Journal of Colorado Policing* considers for publication the following types of articles:

Original Research: Research articles of interest to the members of the Colorado Association of Chiefs of Police are welcome.

Commentaries: Short papers of a philosophical nature addressing important issues, innovative training strategies, and best practices are invited. The journal welcomes the thoughts and comments of the association's members and its other readers.

Literature and Book Reviews: The journal publishes literature and book reviews of well-documented manuscripts on pertinent topics and newly available texts within the discipline.

Legal Updates: Pertinent reviews of legal cases and articles addressing legal issues are published as well.

Letters to the Editor: Relevant letters are published, with authorship, on important topics.

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Table of Contents

Editorial Mission Statement 1

Table of Contents 2

The Bad Dad's Club:" A Qualitative Study on Parenthood and Family Strain Among Midwestern Police Officers

Lisa M. Nichols, Ph.D. & Damiel F. Hemler 3

Avoiding Criminality After Being Socialized in a Deviant Subculture

Eric Watters, Ph.D. 17

Grounded Control and Restraint: Legal Metrics, Training Challenges, and Brazilian jiu-jitsu-Based Principles to Improve Effectiveness and Safety

Jim Medley, J.D. 24

Guidelines for Authors 34

CMU Criminal Justice Bachelor's Degree Programs Ad 35

LMC Criminal Justice Master's Degree Program Ad 38

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Original Research

"The Bad Dad's Club:" A Qualitative Study on Parenthood and Family Strain Among Midwestern Police Officers

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This qualitative study examines how policing impacts officer identity, social connectedness, and family life, with implications for tailoring interventions in Colorado and surrounding Midwestern states. Drawing from in-depth interviews with 37 police officers across a Midwestern state in the United States, the study identified a central theme in which work structure, a policing culture of stoicism, and personal identity strain collectively erode morale and disrupt family relationships and parenting. Officers reported that shift work, unpredictable schedules, and mandatory overtime limited meaningful engagement with spouses and children, while cultural norms of emotional suppression intensified isolation. Negative media coverage and public scrutiny further exacerbated social withdrawal and identity strain. Persistent perceptions of high marital instability, despite contradictory empirical evidence, highlight the role of occupational narratives in shaping relational expectations and undermining resilience. Female officers described additional stressors related to caregiving responsibilities and underrepresentation, revealing gendered dimensions of occupational stress. Findings underscore the urgent need for police agencies to implement evidence-based, culturally informed interventions that support social connectedness, family engagement, and mental health. This study provides actionable insights for Colorado agencies to tailor policies, wellness programs, and counseling resources to better support officers and their families. The results contribute to an emerging understanding of the domestic and social consequences of policing, offering guidance for interventions that promote both individual and organizational resilience.

The structure and demands of modern policing place significant and compounding strain on officers' personal and professional well-being. Organizational factors such as long hours, rotating shift work, excessive overtime, and high turnover contribute to chronic stress that extends beyond the workplace and into officers' homes. These structural pressures frequently disrupt family routines, limit quality time with partners and children, and constrain officers' ability to engage consistently in parenting and social relationships.

These challenges are further compounded by a policing culture that values stoicism, emotional suppression, and self-reliance, which discourages help-seeking and leaves officers navigating stress largely in isolation. Negative public perception and sensationalized media portrayals of law enforcement amplify these pressures, fostering feelings of being

misunderstood, undervalued, and publicly judged. Together, these organizational, cultural, and societal demands create a cycle of stress, social isolation, and diminished morale that can undermine both personal identity and relational functioning.

Despite growing attention to officer wellness, the intersection of these stressors with family life, social connectedness, and emotional well-being remains underexplored. The present qualitative study examines how law enforcement officers perceive the impact of their work on morale, personal identity, and family relationships, with the goal of identifying actionable insights that can guide interventions and support programs. By highlighting the structural, cultural, and relational challenges officers face, this research seeks to inform strategies for enhancing resilience, promoting healthier family engagement, and sustaining well-being among police personnel, particularly within Colorado and other Midwestern jurisdictions.

Literature Review

Types of Law Enforcement Stressors

Research consistently categorizes law enforcement stressors into two broad domains: organizational and operational. Organizational stressors stem from bureaucratic constraints such as inadequate supervision, shift work, lack of support, poor communication, excessive workload, and limited participation in decision-making (Brown & Campbell, 1990; Shane, 2010). These are compounded by hierarchical control structures and rigid departmental policies (Shane, 2010). Operational stressors, in contrast, arise from the unpredictable nature of police work, including repeated exposure to traumatic incidents, public encounters, and violence (Violanti et al., 2017).

Organizational Culture and Structural Inequality

The culture within law enforcement significantly shapes the experience of these stressors, often intensifying their effects. Repressive managerial practices, limited promotional opportunities, inconsistent disciplinary procedures, and perceptions of favoritism contribute to feelings of marginalization and organizational injustice (Morash et al., 2006; Stinchcomb, 2004). These experiences directly impact officer morale and identity, particularly when officers feel undervalued, unsupported, or isolated. Such emotional exhaustion is frequently a byproduct of both structural conditions and the broader occupational culture, which often discourages vulnerability and help-seeking behaviors.

Work Schedules, Fatigue, and Sleep Deprivation

A primary source of this isolation lies in the structure and scheduling inherent to police work. Irregular hours, night shifts, court appearances on off-days, and mandatory overtime disrupt circadian rhythms, reduce sleep quality, and impair recovery (Rajaratnam et al., 2011). Sleep deprivation is associated with poor decision-making, reduced empathy, and heightened aggression (Vila, 2006), as well as increased risks of hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and metabolic dysfunction (Charles et al., 2007). In response, scholars have called for the implementation of fatigue management strategies and improved scheduling practices (James et al., 2018). However, these changes are often constrained by chronic staffing shortages, limited resources, and resistance within police culture itself.

Cultural Norms, Help-Seeking Behavior, and Health Outcomes

The organizational culture of law enforcement is rooted in values such as stoicism, self-reliance, and

emotional suppression. These cultural norms foster a perception that seeking help is a sign of weakness and that personal challenges, particularly those related to parenting or emotional distress, should be managed privately (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010; Skolnick, 1998; Twersky & Glasner, 2005). As a result, officers are frequently left to navigate their stress in isolation. This isolation not only affects officers' mental health but also has tangible effects on their physical well-being. Studies have shown that avoidance-based coping strategies and chronic stress are associated with elevated risks of cardiovascular disease (Joseph et al., 2010; Vena et al., 2015; Violanti et al., 2017; Zimmerman, 2012).

Spillover Effects on Family and Personal Life

The implications of occupational stress permeate police officers' home and family relationships. Officers often report bringing work-related stress into their personal relationships, resulting in emotional withdrawal, increased irritability, and disengagement from family roles (Anderson et al., 2002; Reese & Herbert, 2002). These disruptions can erode parenting relationships and family cohesion. Missed events, disrupted routines, and emotional detachment contribute to conflict, resentment, and even family instability (Arter, 2008; Bishopp et al., 2016). Spouses of officers frequently report anxiety, loneliness, and fear related to their partner's safety, and children may experience the absence of consistent parental involvement.

Gender and Diversity in Policing

Gender dynamics further complicate the relationship between work culture and family life in policing. Despite evidence that male and female officers share similar perspectives on their roles and communities (Worden, 1993), women remain significantly underrepresented in U.S. law enforcement; only 14% of sworn officers identify as female (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022). In contrast, countries such as the UK, Australia, and Sweden have achieved higher representation (20–35%), yet global disparities persist (Archbold et al., 2024; Prenzler, 2023). Women in policing face unique stressors, including sexual harassment, exclusion from informal peer support, and discriminatory practices (Archbold et al., 2024). These factors contribute to increased social isolation and emotional strain, especially for mothers balancing demanding shifts with child care responsibilities (Agocs et al., 2014).

Gender Differences in Coping Strategies

Coping strategies also differ by gender. Haarr and Morash (2006) found that women were more likely than men to manage stress through avoidance behaviors or documentation, highlighting gendered differences in how officers adapt to their roles. However, the dominant occupational culture, rooted in hypermasculinity and emotional suppression, offers little space for alternative coping approaches or recognition of the unique challenges faced by officers with caregiving responsibilities.

Burnout, Interventions, and Barriers to Support

The cumulative effects of organizational and cultural stressors have significant consequences for officers' personal lives. Johnson et al. (2005) and West et al. (2021) found that stress at work often spills into the home, damaging marital satisfaction and increasing family conflict. These feedback loops can intensify emotional exhaustion and reduce resilience at work, creating a cycle of burnout and disengagement. Although some interventions, such as peer support programs, family-inclusive wellness initiatives, and counseling, have shown promise, their effectiveness is often limited by cultural stigma around emotional vulnerability (Papazoglou &

Andersen, 2014). Participation in such programs remains low, especially in departments that lack formal institutional support or resources.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

These findings paint a clear picture: the organizational structure and culture of law enforcement create systemic stress that undermines their family life and personal well-being. The disconnection from family, inability to engage fully in parenting roles, and lack of institutional support diminish morale and strain officer identity. Unfortunately, the intersection of policing and family dynamics remains a severely understudied area. Little empirical attention has been given to how police culture and structural features specifically affect officers' capacity to function as family members, or how these domestic consequences feed back into departmental outcomes like retention, job satisfaction, and organizational loyalty.

Methods

The authors report no conflicts of interest, and this study received approval from the university's Institutional Review Board. Data were collected between January and May 2025 from 37 sworn law enforcement officers representing multiple agencies within a Midwestern state in the United States. Participants were recruited through a combination of snowball and convenience sampling methods, including professional networks, in-person outreach, electronic flyers distributed to police chiefs, and internal agency communication channels. Interested officers accessed the study via a QR code that directed them to an online informed consent form. Consent was documented through the voluntary submission of a phone number; no additional identifying information was collected. Access to consent records was restricted to the primary investigator.

Semi-structured telephone interviews, guided by five open-ended questions, were conducted by three members of the research team. Verbal informed consent was obtained prior to each interview, and participants were advised that participation was voluntary, confidential, and that interviews would not be audio recorded. To ensure that no recording devices were used, interviewers transcribed participant responses verbatim in real time during each interview.

Semi-structured interviews were employed to capture the nuanced perspectives of police officers regarding the impact of their work on personal identity, family life, and social connectedness. This qualitative approach allowed participants to share detailed, context-rich experiences in their own words, providing insights into the complex interplay of organizational, cultural, and external stressors that would be difficult to quantify through surveys or structured instruments.

To protect confidentiality and privacy, participants were assigned unique identification codes ranging from P01 to P41, ensuring that phone numbers were not linked to interview data. No demographic information was formally requested to enhance participant comfort and protect privacy; however, some participants voluntarily self-identified demographic characteristics. In these instances, demographic information was stored in a separate Excel file with no linkage to participants' names, consent forms, identification codes, or interview data. Although 41 police officers initially volunteered to participate, the final sample consisted of 37 participants. Two individuals did not provide a phone number on the consent form, and two did not return follow-up calls to schedule interviews.

Interview transcripts were independently

reviewed by each of the three interviewers to remove potentially identifying information and verbal fillers prior to compilation for analysis. Data were analyzed using a rigorous four-stage thematic coding process that incorporated both deductive codes derived from the existing literature and inductive codes that emerged from the data (see Table 1). Coding discrepancies were resolved collaboratively among the researchers to ensure consistency and analytic rigor.

Ethical principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality were strictly upheld throughout the study. The research team adhered to the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association and those of this journal, and participants were informed of their rights at each stage of the research process. All interview transcripts and related materials were securely stored on the principal investigator's password-protected laptop and backed up on a password-protected flash drive. Access to all study materials was restricted to the research team.

Results

Drawing from in-depth interviews with 37 police officers across a Midwestern state, this study identified a central theme: the combined impact of work structure, a policing culture of stoicism, and personal identity strain eroded officer morale and negatively affected family life, parenting, and social connectedness. These interconnected factors contributed to social isolation, relational strain, and diminished well-being.

Work Structure and Family Life

Approximately 43% of participants (n=16) identified structural aspects of policing, including shift work, inflexible schedules, and excessive workloads, as primary sources of chronic stress affecting both personal and family life. Night shifts and rotating schedules contributed to widespread sleep disruption: "Shift work and sleep disruption… it's a stress on our body that we probably don't even realize." The inherent unpredictability of police work further constrained officers' ability to plan daily activities or meaningful family engagement: "We can't pre-plan what our days will look like," and "we don't get the time off that they needs." This unpredictability fostered guilt and reluctance to take leave, as officers worried their absence would overburden colleagues, producing a "downward spiral of stress" marked by social withdrawal, diminished family engagement, and maladaptive coping strategies, including increased alcohol use.

Financial pressures exacerbated these challenges. Many officers reported the necessity of working additional shifts or overtime to support their families: "You work a 40-hour work week and then you go take one or two overtime shifts because the cost of living has gone up… A lot of us need overtime to make everything work financially for our families." The combination of extended shifts, limited recovery, and insufficient family time created persistent strain, summarized by one officer: "The stress builds and builds and just spills over into home life."

Parenting and Spousal Engagement

Participants reported difficulty maintaining meaningful engagement with spouses and children due to schedule unpredictability and cumulative exhaustion. Parenting routines, such as attending children's events or organizing childcare, required extensive planning and were emotionally taxing: "If you have a family and kids, the job can really cut into time with your kids… that distance also puts a lot of stress on them," and "we have a joke… we're all

members of 'the bad dad's club'. But honestly that's not the kind of father I wanted to be." One officer reflected on the impact of shift work: "I work swing shift, so I leave when my kids are at home and I'm asleep when they're at school, so I don't see them my entire day. That's a huge stressor."

Intentional communication with spouses was critical, particularly when high-profile incidents might appear in the media: "If something big happens and my family is going to hear about it in the news, I have to make sure to take that extra second to text my wife and tell her I'm okay." While some agencies promoted a family-first culture—encouraging officers to "take the time you need to cope and relax"—participants reported limited practical ability to do so due to financial and overtime demands: "We know we should take time for ourselves. But most of us aren't going to do that. I don't have enough time as it is."

Officers in dual-law enforcement households described unique challenges. While shared professional understanding could be supportive, stress was often compounded: "I deal with my own issues being a cop but then having my husband being a cop… that makes things twice as hard." Concerns about transferring stress onto partners were common: "I don't want to offload all the stress on my wife because it's stressful for her too… if I vent to my wife, it will give her nightmares."

Although research challenges the notion that police divorce rates are significantly higher than the general population (McCoy & Aamodt, 2010), participants perceived high risk: "I know the divorce rate is very, very high in law enforcement and it doubles if you're both in LE." This perception may normalize marital strain and undermine morale within officer families.

Female participants in this study (n=9, 24%) highlighted compounded emotional and relational burdens. They emphasized the toll of emotional depletion and difficulty maintaining work–life balance: "You give all of yourself at work and you don't have much of yourself left," and "It's easy… to be really engaged in work and when you leave here you just don't have outside relationships." Supportive relationships, whether with spouses or peers, were critical buffers: "We could talk about our experiences and stressors at work and home and really be there for each other. I really don't think I could have gotten through all of that without her." Female officers also described intentional efforts to prioritize family engagement: "I make sure I'm at my kids' sporting events and school events. I want to be present for them while they grow up."

Social Connectedness

Officers reported that social isolation extended beyond family life. Many maintained friendships outside law enforcement to avoid reliving negative work experiences: "Having friends outside of law enforcement is important to me. I'm not here to relive what I did at work and especially if it impacted me in a negative way." Positive cultural changes, such as team-building activities during training, fostered bonding and stress relief: "It was just a thing… we played ultimate frisbee or tag football… it allowed us to relax a little bit and bond."

Negative media portrayals and public criticism reinforced social withdrawal: "The external perception… the messages we're getting from the media and protestors about how awful we are," and "You see stuff on the news and in the media that's just inaccurate… it's very, very rare that there's a chief or sheriff who will step up to publicly set the record straight." This scrutiny contributed to psychological withdrawal and insularity: "You end up isolating

yourself from the rest of the world… from families and people outside of work that they're close to."

These overlapping stressors also strained personal identity. Officers reported growing professional insularity: "When you get years under your belt as a cop, you start to realize you're looking at everything in your life from a legal aspect… They start noticing they only hang out with other cops and it can become a big stressor to your family." Maladaptive relational behaviors, including emotionally detached sexual relationships, were noted: "Cops have very short sexual relationships… They want to create an opportunity in which they can push somebody away so they don't feel like they're being pushed away."

Despite these challenges, officers described strategies to preserve identity and social connection. Some intentionally distanced themselves from occupational identity: "I've tried really hard… to make sure being a cop wasn't my only identity. I generally don't have any cop friends. I don't hang out with cops outside of work." Others emphasized family as a stabilizing force: "I come home and completely immerse myself in my family. Forgetting about work and being what I need to be for my family." Departmental initiatives, including peer support programs, spouse-inclusive events, and wellness resources, were cited as helpful in mitigating isolation and promoting well-being.

Discussion

This study underscores the pervasive ways policing undermines officers' social connectedness, family life, and personal identity, extending prior research on occupational stress in law enforcement. Consistent with literature categorizing stressors into organizational and operational domains (Brown & Campbell, 1990; Shane, 2010; Violanti et al., 2017), participants described structural, cultural, and external pressures that collectively impaired personal and familial well-being. Organizational stressors, including shift work, inflexible schedules, excessive workloads, and mandatory overtime, disrupted circadian rhythms, reduced sleep quality, and limited engagement with spouses and children, aligning with prior findings linking irregular scheduling to impaired recovery, physiological strain, and diminished family involvement (Charles et al., 2007; Rajaratnam et al., 2011).

Cultural norms emphasizing stoicism, emotional suppression, and self-reliance intensified these structural stressors. Officers navigated challenges privately, discouraged from seeking help, which fostered isolation and emotional withdrawal (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010; Skolnick, 1998; Twersky & Glasner, 2005). Parenting responsibilities were particularly affected, with disrupted routines, missed events, and emotional distance contributing to relational strain and decreased marital satisfaction, consistent with research on occupational stress spilling over into family life (Anderson et al., 2002; Bishopp et al., 2016; Reese & Herbert, 2002).

External stressors, including negative media coverage and public scrutiny, further amplified social isolation and psychological strain (Papazoglou & Andersen, 2014; Violanti et al., 2017). Officers relied heavily on peer relationships for emotional support, reflecting trauma-bonding dynamics, yet this often led to insularity and diminished connections with family and broader social networks. The convergence of internal, structural, and external stressors illustrates a cumulative burden on social and familial well-being (Papazoglou & Andersen, 2014; Violanti et al., 2017).

Persistent perceptions of high divorce rates, despite evidence to the contrary (McCoy & Aamodt,

2010), may normalize marital strain, reduce morale, and reinforce fatalistic expectations about relationship stability, further constraining family-based resilience (Johnson et al., 2005; West et al., 2021). Gendered experiences amplified these effects. Female officers reported compounded emotional labor, caregiving responsibilities, and underrepresentation in informal peer networks, consistent with prior research on gendered occupational stress (Agocs et al., 2014 ; Archbold et al., 2024). Gendered coping strategies and structural constraints often limited women's ability to rely on family and social relationships for stress mitigation (Haarr & Morash, 2006).

Overall, the cumulative effect of structural, cultural, and external stressors eroded officers' sense of personal identity and capacity for social connection. Chronic occupational stress constrained relational fulfillment, parenting, and family engagement, even when supportive relationships were available (Haarr & Morash, 2006; Johnson et al., 2005; West et al., 2021). While departmental initiatives such as peer support programs, family-inclusive wellness events, and counseling offer potential buffers, participation is often limited by stigma and cultural barriers (Papazoglou & Andersen, 2014).

These findings demonstrate that policing compromises the very social and familial relationships that could serve as sources of resilience and healing. By connecting these results to prior literature, the study highlights the urgent need for structural reforms, cultural change, and targeted interventions to support family life, social connectedness, and overall officer well-being.

Conclusion

This study offers critical insight into the occupational experiences and challenges faced by law enforcement officers in a midwestern state, highlighting how work structures, organizational culture, and public perception shape their wellbeing, morale, and family relationships. Officers described a range of challenges that extend beyond operational stress, including how shift work and unpredictable schedules negatively affect family life and parenthood, often straining personal relationships and contributing to isolation. These findings reinforce the idea that officer wellness must be understood in relation to both professional and personal domains. Efforts should include reconfiguring work schedules to support family stability, training leadership to model and support mental health help-seeking and fostering organizational environments where psychological safety is the norm.

This study highlights the profound and multifaceted toll of policing on officer identity, social connectedness, and family life. Structural demands such as shift work, unpredictable schedules, and mandatory overtime intersect with cultural norms of stoicism and emotional suppression, creating an environment in which officers struggle to maintain meaningful engagement with spouses, children, and broader social networks. These pressures leave officers questioning where they can experience success and whether their efforts to sustain relationships are worthwhile. Collectively, these stressors erode morale, compromise personal identity, and diminish the capacity for family and social connections to serve as sources of resilience and healing. These resources are critical for managing the occupational and psychological challenges inherent in policing.

These findings underscore the need for targeted interventions at both micro and macro levels to mitigate the negative impact of policing on family

life, identity, and social connectedness (See Table 2). At the individual and agency level, strategies such as family-inclusive wellness programs, police-specific therapy, parenting support groups, peer mentorship, flexible scheduling, on-site recovery spaces, and coaching on role separation can help officers manage stress and preserve relationships. At the systemic and cultural level, efforts to shift norms away from stoicism, promote help-seeking, implement family-focused wellness policies, develop public communication strategies, and reduce structural isolation through workload adjustments can further support officer well-being. Collectively, these interventions highlight actionable pathways for agencies in Colorado and surrounding Midwestern states to strengthen family engagement, social connectedness, and identity resilience. Such interventions can help officers move beyond the notion of the "bad dad's club," fostering family relationships and parenting practices that both officers and their families can take pride in.

This study is not without several limitations. Demographic data were not systematically collected, limiting analysis by rank, gender, tenure, or racial/ethnic identity. The sample, drawn from multiple agencies in one Midwestern state, was not balanced across rural and urban jurisdictions or other regions, restricting generalizability. Additionally, the broad framing of interview questions sometimes limited detail; references to "leadership" were often unclear, leaving it uncertain whether participants meant direct supervisors, command staff, or agency heads, which complicated thematic interpretation.

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Tables

Table 1

Deductive and Inductive Codes & Rules

Deductive	Code rule	Inductive	Code rule
Mental health	Explicit mention and/or referencing topics like depression, anxiety, counseling, PTSD	Work structure	Explicit mention, shift work, inflexible schedule, workload, rotating schedules, night shift, etc.
Turnover	Explicit mention and/or quitting/resigning/leaving and/or hiring/training new people	Impact on family	Explicit mention, work demands negatively impact time with family and relationships
Resources	Explicit mention of formal and informal resources, can include exercise, counseling, etc.	Female officers	Explicit mention, mentions of motherhood
		Stoic culture	Explicit mention, feelings, examples of being strong and not being weak
		Criticism from public and media	Explicit
		Identity and morale	Explicit, feelings, mention of examples

Table 2

Micro and Macro Solutions Based on Results

Level	Focus Area	Recommendation
Micro (Individual/Agency)	1. Family-Inclusive Wellness	Offer psychoeducation for families, police-specific family therapy, and parenting support groups.
	2. Peer & Mentorship Models	Establish peer support programs and pair recruits with mentors for both emotional and professional support.
	3. Flexible Scheduling	Provide wellness leave post-critical incidents and offer flexible or compressed schedules.

Table 2

Micro and Macro Solutions Based on Results

Level	Focus Area	Recommendation
	4. On-Site Wellness Resources	Create quiet recovery spaces and provide confidential psychological services, including telehealth.
	5. Work-Life Identity Support	Offer coaching on role separation and normalize vulnerability through leadership example.
Macro (Systemic/Cultural)	1. Cultural Shift from Stoicism	Redefine help-seeking as strength; include mental health and emotional intelligence in training.
	2. Public Communication Strategy	Share wellness efforts publicly and collaborate with media for balanced portrayals.
	3. Family in Wellness Policy	Mandate family-inclusive wellness programs and fund research to evaluate them.
	4. Global Standards for Wellbeing	Encourage international guidelines for mental health and share scalable models globally.
	5. Structural Isolation Prevention	Reduce excessive hours and offer housing support to strengthen family connection.

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Original Research

Avoiding Criminality After Being Socialized in a Deviant Subculture

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The author examines learning-based explanations of criminal behavior, with a primary focus on Sutherland's differential association theory and related criminological perspectives. The author argues that criminal behavior is not innate but learned through social interactions within one's environment, particularly among intimate groups. The discussion outlines Sutherland's nine propositions, emphasizing the role of socialization, definitions favorable to law violation, and the frequency, duration, and intensity of associations in shaping deviant behavior. The author also connects these ideas to broader developmental frameworks, including Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, and explores the concept of legal socialization in shaping attitudes toward law and authority. Additionally, why some individuals resist engaging in criminal activity despite exposure to criminogenic environments is considered. Drawing on social control theory and Cloward and Ohlin's opportunity theory, the author highlights the importance of strong social bonds, positive role models, and supportive micro-environments, such as family structures, in fostering conformity. The analysis concludes that while structural and social risk factors significantly influence criminal behavior, they do not determine outcomes universally. Individual variation, particularly the presence of prosocial influences, can mitigate these risks and explain why some individuals avoid deviance despite adverse conditions. Ultimately, no single theory fully accounts for criminal behavior, underscoring the complexity of human decision-making in criminology.

What There are many reasons people engage in deviant behavior, and criminologists have devised numerous explanations as to why. Physiology, psychology, religion, and, more recently, genetics have been applied to try to understand why people turn to crime. The idea that criminal behavior is learned is one possible avenue of explanation. In this article, I will examine some learning theories of crime and discuss reasons why certain people resist such deviant behavior when all the factors that normally lead to criminality seem stacked against them.

Differential Association Theory

Environmental and societal influences play a significant role in the development and sustainment of criminal activity in individuals. Much research supports the understanding that low intelligence and limited educational access are positively correlated with criminal behavior (Harrison, Hughes, & Gott, 2019; Martin, Martin, Dell, Davis, & Guerrieri, 2008; Roe-Sepowitz, 2009; Schwartz & Beaver, 2011). In his research on criminalization, Sutherland focused on how socialization within one's environment affected deviant criminal behavior.

Socialization

"Socialization refers to a process of human interaction on both one-to-one and group levels

wherein behavior is (1) learned from others and (2) reflects society's cultural and subcultural values" (Miller, Schreck, Tewksbury, & Barnes, 2015, p. 100). To describe that socialization, Sutherland developed his theory of differential association. Differential association emphasizes two primary influences, which are (a) agents of socialization and (b) content of socialization (Miller et al., 2015). Agents of socialization are those who socialize someone into the requisite culture. Miller et al. (2015) described agents as teachers who can be formal, such as family members or schoolteachers, or informal, such as peers. "Social interaction directly shapes the socialization process through the related concepts of observation, role modeling, expectation development, and imitation" (Miller et al., 2015, p. 100).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model. The discussion of agents and contents of socialization relates to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of development. Bronfenbrenner suggested that children develop within an ecosystem with five distinct systems, each with a different mechanism and level of developmental influence (Harmening, 2013). Specifically, Bronfenbrenner's macrosystem closely matches differential association theory. "The macrosystem is composed of cultural values and customs, and also the laws and social expectations which guide our lives" (Harmening, 2013, p. 6), which relates almost identically to Sutherland's social interaction which "directly shapes the socialization process through the related concepts of observation, role modeling, expectation development, and imitation" (Miller et al., 2015, p. 100). Both Sutherland and Bronfenbrenner examined why people are inculcated into a culture or group. As a result of his research into why people turn to criminality, Sutherland identified nine propositions that describe how socialization into criminal behavior works.

Sutherland's Nine Propositions

First, that "criminal behavior is learned" (Hoffman, 2011, p. 125). Sutherland suggested that criminal behavior "is not spontaneous or natural," but rather "comes from the environment (Miller et al., 2015). Second, "criminal behavior is learned in interaction with other people in a process of communication" (Hoffman, 2011, p. 125). In that proposition, Sutherland stressed the impact of the social environment, which he took further in the third proposition. Third, "the principal part of the learning of criminal behavior occurs within intimate personal groups" (Hoffman, 2011, p. 125). According to Miller et al. (2015), this means different people exert different levels of social influence depending on the strength of the social bonds involved. One may be more influenced by someone in a position of trust than by a stranger.

Fourth, "when criminal behavior is learned, the learning includes techniques of committing the crime, which are sometimes very complicated and sometimes very simple, and the specific direction of motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes" (Hoffman, 2011, p. 125). In that, Sutherland stresses nurture over nature, arguing that everything associated with criminal activity is a learned behavior, including the reasons and excuses used to justify such behavior (Miller et al., 2015). Fifth, "the specific direction of motives and drives is learned from definitions of legal codes as favorable and unfavorable" (Hoffman, 2011, p. 125). "This proposition points to the idea of 'normative conflict,' in which, in an absolute sense, there is no right or wrong and 'crime' is only such relative to the dominant legal code" (Miller et al., 2015, p. 100).

Sixth, "a person becomes a delinquent

because of an excess of definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of law" (Hoffman, 2011, p. 125). In that preposition, Sutherland points out that one can be influenced towards or away from criminal behavior and that whichever is most predominant, either in frequency, intensity, or effectiveness, will win out. Seventh, "differential association may vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity" (Hoffman, 2011, p. 125). "Put differently, the most frequent, longest-running, earliest, and closest influences will be most efficacious or determinant of learned behavior" (Miller et al., 2015, p. 100). These two propositions will feature prominently in a later discussion of how some who are raised within a deviant subculture manage to resist such negative socialization.

Eighth, "the process of learning criminal behavior by association with criminal and anticriminal patterns incorporates all the mechanisms that are involved in any other learning" (Hoffman, 2011, p. 125). In that proposition, Sutherland goes somewhat against the grain, suggesting that low intelligence is not a prerequisite for criminal behavior. He suggests that, since criminal behavior is a learned activity, one must be at least average in intelligence to learn criminal techniques. According to Miller et al. (2015), "learning crime is also no different than learning arithmetic or anything else" (p. 100). That does, however, somewhat discount that not all criminal behavior requires finer intellectual abilities. For example, shoplifting or robbery requires little or no higher-level thinking, in contrast to some more complicated white-collar crimes.

Sutherland's ninth and final differential association proposition is that "although criminal behavior is an expression of general needs and values, it is not explained by those general needs and values, because noncriminal behavior is an expression of the same needs and values" (Hoffman, 2011, p. 125). This proposition relates to Durkheim's anomie and Merton's strain theory, which relate to one's physiological, psychological, and emotional need to be successful in society. There seems to be no doubt that, particularly in Western societies like the United States, the need and/or desire to *keep up with the Joneses,* "what Messner and Rosenfeld (1994) call the American Dream" (Miller et al., 2015, p. 121), drives people to make bad decisions, including to get involved in criminal behavior.

Legal Socialization

Legal socialization is a form of socialization particularly relevant to discussions of criminal behavior. According to Moule, Burruss, Gifford, Parry, and Fox (2019), "individuals who feel that police treat citizens unfairly, and/ or that the law is not applicable to their everyday lives, often turn to self-help to solve their problems" (p. 26). In other words, those who do not feel the criminal justice system is fair and are therefore cynical about the system's laws and the agents who enforce them may not feel the need to follow societal norms regarding such laws. That cynicism can be described as being undersocialized to the legal system.

On the other hand, one may be socialized into a counterculture that deliberately rejects or opposes the legal system. For example, one might be raised in a minority community in which "?a collective history is formed through adverse experiences with and widespread mistrust in the police" (Kwak, Dierenfeldt, & McNeeley, 2019, p. 26), inculcating him or her into a belief system that distrusts the criminal justice system and its agents, regardless of whether ot not that person has directly experienced a negative interaction with the system. Those in the same

societal group, with whom they have many other shared experiences, are trustworthy, and their experiences, or perceived experiences, are internalized and believed with little or no doubt.

How Some People Resist Criminality Against All the Odds

To discuss how one might resist the pressure and indoctrination that comes from growing up in a deviant subculture, the concept of a subculture must be examined. A subculture is one that develops within another existing culture. Youth street gangs are an often-used example of such a subculture in a criminological context (Bennett & Brookman, 2011). One may be raised within certain cultural confines, but associations with other members of that larger cultural group may form around beliefs that are not addressed or accepted by the larger group.

In the gang example, younger members of the larger culture may come together because of similar feelings of anger or disappointment fueled by their shared socioeconomic woes. For example, according to Bennett and Brookman (2011), "to overcome lack of success within the mainstream society, [some] youths sought status from an oppositional subculture that valued toughness, immediate gratification, and violence" (p. 83). That finding illustrated the impact of countercultural ideas. To further examine this phenomenon, there must be a short discussion of social contract and control theories.

Social Control Theory

Social contract theory holds that people come together to form a society. They may gather for many reasons, including race, religion, socioeconomic status, and culture. People do not always choose to live together, but instead, are sometimes forced to live together due to circumstances outside of their control. Regardless of their reasons for coming together to live in harmony, they must agree on certain social norms, rules, and ethics that everyone must follow. That is the social contract. However, not everyone, for whatever reason, can or will follow those rules, so societies develop sanctions to punish, incapacitate, and rehabilitate those who violate the social contract. That is done to protect society and all those who are part of it. Social control theory is a natural extension of social contract theory.

Social control theory approaches the social bond from the opposite direction to social contract theory. While the social contract helps keep people in line through threats of punishment for violating the contract, according to Miller, Schreck, Tewksbury, and Barnes (2015), social control theory holds that violations occur when people have weak ties to established social norms. "Social bonds act as barriers to opportunities for crime, as well as restraints. Thus, criminals are not socialized into crime as other theories might say, but are in fact undersocialized into conformity" (Miller et al., 2015, p. 144). That is essentially the same argument as differential association: the idea that when people are not properly socialized into the culture's belief system, they do not value the culture's rules and norms and violate them through deviant (i.e., criminal) behavior.

On the other hand, some criminologists believe that deviant behavior can be driven by socialization into a deviant subculture rather than simply by undersocialization. Matsueda and Heimer's:

> Differential social control theory specifies that delinquent behavior occurs in problematic situations in which individuals take the role of significant others and consider the others' reactions to alternative lines of action before selecting a delinquent or nondelinquent

> solution to the problem. This serial process of cognition invokes a multidimensional self, or identities-a view of oneself from the standpoint of others-in the process of informal social control (Matsueda, 2001, p. 129).

In other words, when making the calculus of whether or not to act in a deviant manner (i.e., criminally in this context), people tend to concentrate on what those whose opinion they value would think of their behavior. Many people simply do not concern themselves with the larger view of what society would think of them and their behavior. People's worlds and spheres of influence are small, so they tend to think on a much smaller scale, which Heimer and Matsueda's differential theory suggests. So, in that, one can see the power of socialization from both negative and positive perspectives. One can be influenced to commit crimes or to avoid such actions.

Cloward and Ohlin on Gangs and Opportunity

Cloward and Ohlin suggest that even those who are raised within a deviant subculture can resist criminality. This is because they are exposed to a more intense and valued form of cultural socialization. Consider the impact of gangs on youthful offenders. While all potential members may grow up and develop within the same neighborhood and, ergo, a similar cultural context, not all children end up joining gangs and taking part in criminal behavior. Some do, but importantly, some do not. Cloward and Ohlin's argument was that while some children fall into gangs because of a lack of parental interest, not all children experience such a lack (Miller et al., 2015). Considered by many to be strain theorists, some see their opportunity theory as a critique of other strain theorists, such as Merton (Cullen, 1988). Cloward and Ohlin found that some youths fall into criminal activity due to a lack of opportunity, akin to Merton, but they also saw that some are steered away from gangs by other influential people in their lives. For example, Clark (1962) found that some children avoid criminal activity simply due to strong rule-setting and enforcement within the home, which can be called a normalizing subculture, even if only on a micro-cultural scale, such as within a single-family unit. The impact of such caring, whether positive or negative, can provide a child with a sense of belonging and care that is often lacking and, as countless studies have shown, can drive them into the arms of a local criminal street gang.

Conclusion

Many predictors of future criminal behavior have been identified and validated in criminological research. However, what always holds true in the social sciences is that no single answer fits all cases. Whenever people are involved, aberrant choices will be made, either to engage in deviant behavior or to avoid it despite all the factors that generally lead in the contrary direction. Nine out of ten children who grow up in a neighborhood may turn to gangs, violence, and criminal behavior, but there can be, and often will be, that tenth child who, for any of a myriad of reasons, does not follow the same path as his peers. Just a little care and attention from an influential person in his or her life can be one of the factors that makes the difference.

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Original Research

Grounded Control and Restraint: Legal Metrics, Training Challenges, and Brazilian jiu-jitsu-Based Principles to Improve Effectiveness and Safety

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Police agencies in Colorado face increasing scrutiny regarding how officers control and restrain individuals during physical arrest encounters. High-profile restraint-related injuries, evolving medical understanding of positional risk, and recent statutory reforms have narrowed the margin for error in restraint practices. Colorado's elimination of qualified immunity for state constitutional claims and the statutory requirement that agencies indemnify officers for most judgments heighten the financial consequences of restraint-related injuries. At the same time, courts increasingly emphasize that force must diminish as control is achieved. These developments place pressure on agencies to adopt restraint practices that allow officers to modulate force during rapidly evolving encounters. This article examines grounded restraint through the lenses of biomechanics, training design, and contemporary legal standards. It argues that prone restraint often lacks a structured sequence for establishing control, leaving officers to improvise restraint mechanics while resistance remains biomechanically available. Because fully resisting prone restraint scenarios are difficult to reproduce safely in training, officers rarely practice the task under realistic conditions. Structured grappling systems, including Brazilian jiu-jitsu–influenced defensive tactics, offer a contrasting model by establishing positional control before attempting mechanical restraint. Techniques built around positional control, leverage, structured procedures, and the tactical use of time may allow officers to train under realistic resistance, maintain cognitive control during high-stress encounters, and reduce reliance on improvisation during dynamic restraint events.

Police agencies in Colorado face increasing scrutiny regarding how officers control and restrain individuals during physical arrest encounters. High-profile restraint-related injuries, evolving medical understanding of positional risk, and recent legislative reforms have narrowed the margin for error in restraint practices. Colorado's elimination of qualified immunity for state constitutional claims and the requirement that agencies indemnify officers for most judgments further heighten the financial consequences to agencies for restraint-related injuries (Colo. Rev. Stat. § 13-21-131, 2020). At the same time, federal courts increasingly emphasize that force must diminish as control is achieved, placing pressure on agencies to adopt policies that require, and training methods that facilitate, the modulation of force as threats dissipate (*Teetz v. Stepien*, 2025; *Krueger v. Phillips*, 2025).

One feature of police restraint practice deserves closer examination: the widespread reliance on prone positioning as a default ground-control tactic. Despite its common use, prone restraint is rarely taught as a standardized technique with a defined sequence of steps. Officers are often instructed to place a resisting subject prone and secure the hands behind the back, leaving the mechanical details of establishing control largely to

improvisation during live encounters. Because movement and resistance remain biomechanically available from the prone position, officers are often forced to attempt to apply restraint before control is stabilized.

This structure has important implications for training and operational outcomes. Techniques that rely on improvised control are difficult to coherently train and difficult to practice under realistic resistance. Training environments typically limit resistance during prone restraint drills because full-intensity practice can create injury risks. As a result, the conditions officers encounter in the field—restraining a fully resisting prone subject—are not effectively simulated during training. These dynamics are further complicated by research showing that acute emotional arousal can impair cognitive control during high-stress encounters (Arnsten, 2009).

Structured grappling systems offer a contrasting model. In disciplines such as Brazilian jiu-jitsu, practitioners establish positional control before attempting restraint or submission. Because the opponent's movement is first neutralized, practitioners can train safely at full resistance (Spanias et al., 2022). This training structure produces techniques that are repeatable and scalable under pressure. The distinction between improvised restraint and structured control therefore has important implications for police training, evaluation, and risk management.

This article examines grounded restraint practices through the lenses of biomechanics, training design, and contemporary legal standards. It argues that restraint methods capable of establishing control before attempting mechanical restraint may provide a more consistent foundation for training, evaluation, and policy development than approaches that rely on improvised control from the prone position.

Control, Restraint, and Prone Positioning

Law enforcement training materials and professional practice have long distinguished between control and restraint as related but separate operational objectives. *Control* refers to stabilizing a subject's movement, limiting balance, and reducing the capacity for assault or escape. *Restraint*, by contrast, involves mechanically preserving that control, typically through the application of handcuffs or other devices. Training literature cautions that attempting restraint without first establishing control increases resistance and injury risk (Siddle, 1995; Davis, 2025). Comparable principles appear in grappling literature, where successful submissions depend on positional dominance and movement control prior to applying finishing techniques (Spanias et al., 2022).

Prone positioning has historically been used as an intuitive method of managing resisting individuals, becoming embedded in police training largely through repetition and custom rather than empirical validation (Adams et al., 1995). Significant concerns have emerged regarding the safety profile of prone positioning. Federal awareness of these risks dates back decades, when the National Institute of Justice cautioned that prone restraint could contribute to unexpected deaths under certain conditions (U.S. Department of Justice, 1995). Investigative reporting and research continue to document in-custody deaths resulting from prone restraint encounters (Dunklin et al., 2024; Police Executive Research Forum, 2024). Although laboratory and observational studies have struggled to replicate the complex conditions present during real-world arrest struggles, the precise physiological mechanisms underlying these outcomes remain debated (Chan et al., 2004; Hall et al., 2012,

2015; Kroll et al., 2019; Milner & Desmoulin, 2025).

One explanation for the operational difficulty of prone restraint lies in the biomechanics of the position itself. Rather than neutralizing movement, the prone position preserves multiple pathways for generating force. From a prone posture, individuals can generate upward propulsion through coordinated elbow and shoulder extension followed by hip and trunk extension toward standing (Neumann, 2024). Officers attempting to restrain a prone subject may therefore be required to counter ongoing elevation attempts while simultaneously attempting to secure arms. Because resistance remains biomechanically available, officers often attempt restraint before force generation is neutralized, collapsing several tactical tasks—movement control, threat mitigation, and mechanical restraint—into a single process. Preventing elevation frequently leads officers to apply downward or compressive force, strikes, or intermediate weapons to halt attempts to stand or to get the arms behind the back. Rather than following a predictable sequence of trained steps, officers must react to moment-to-moment variations in subject movement, leaving the mechanics of restraint largely improvised and unguided by training.

Prone positioning also limits officers' ability to observe for potential weapons. When subjects are positioned prone, the torso and arms often obscure the front waistband area from view. Law enforcement research and training literature consistently identify the front waistband as a common location for weapon concealment (Pinizzotto et al., 2006; Johnson, 2007). Reduced visibility can increase uncertainty during already dynamic encounters and may heighten officer anxiety and perceived threat levels (Connelly et al., 2023).

High levels of emotional arousal during physical confrontations may shift officer decision-making away from deliberate cognitive control and toward rapid threat-driven responses. Neuroscience research suggests that acute stress activates limbic threat-processing systems, particularly the amygdala, while temporarily suppressing prefrontal cortical functions associated with reasoning, impulse control, and complex decision-making (LeDoux, 2002; Arnsten, 2009). This process has been popularized as an "amygdala hijack," describing how emotionally salient stimuli can trigger rapid defensive reactions before more deliberate cognitive processes fully engage (Goleman, 1995). Studies involving police officers similarly indicate that elevated stress can degrade attentional control, perceptual accuracy, and motor coordination during high-threat encounters (Nieuwenhuys et al., 2012; Andersen & Gustafsberg, 2016).

Under these conditions, officers may rely more heavily on instinctive reactions rather than recalling and applying trained techniques. This reinforces the need for control structures that stabilize encounters early, reduce emotional escalation, and preserve the cognitive bandwidth necessary to apply trained procedures as encounters progress. The previously discussed biomechanical and perceptual factors help explain why attempts to achieve control in the prone position can devolve into unpredictable struggles, provoking force escalation. They also show why restraint methods should be evaluated not only by whether they can secure handcuffs, but by whether they provide officers a broader safety margin under stress. The training implications of this distinction are examined in the following section.

Implications for Standardization, Training, and Evaluation

The biomechanical and psychological

dynamics described above complicate efforts to develop standardized training around prone positioning. Because resistance remains available from the position, officer responses are necessarily reactive and shaped by moment-to-moment subject behavior rather than a predictable sequence of trained steps. The absence of stabilized control allows multiple pathways for resistance, producing varied struggle dynamics. This variability limits the ability to design training that prepares officers for specific resistance patterns and instead requires officers to improvise responses under stress, precisely when emotional arousal may impair deliberate decision-making.

These dynamics also create practical limitations for training. Practicing prone restraint against fully resisting partners can introduce injury risks, including uncontrolled falls, abrasions from the ground, joint injuries, or discomfort from repeated compressive force. As a result, defensive tactics training commonly relies on cooperative or only partially resistant partners when practicing prone restraint. The task officers must perform in the field, restraining a fully resisting individual, may then be experienced by officers for the first time in the field setting. This first-time experience may exacerbate anxiety and undermine confidence in the success of the trained method.

Structured grappling systems address this problem differently. In disciplines such as Brazilian jiu-jitsu, practitioners establish positional control before attempting restraint or submission by stabilizing movement through the shoulders, hips, limbs, or base (Spanias et al., 2022). By limiting an opponent's ability to generate force, these positions permit progressive resistance and live problem-solving within a more controlled training environment. This structure allows repeated exposure to realistic struggle dynamics while keeping resistance within a familiar range of practiced movements. Repeated practice under resistance is more consistent with the motor-learning principles identified in police performance literature than training limited to cooperative or hypothetical drilling (Di Nota & Huhta, 2019).

These differences have important implications for evaluating restraint practices. Research examining "prone restraint" outcomes often aggregates incidents using heterogeneous positional descriptions without specifying the method used to achieve control or how force was applied (Hall et al., 2012, 2015; Ross & Hazlett, 2016). Such studies therefore tabulate outcomes of encounters with loosely defined variables rather than providing method-relevant data that can guide the improvement of control methods. In contrast, defined grappling-based control methods, such as crossover arm control, can be studied for both control effectiveness and injury risk (Scuderi et al., 2026) because the movement restrictions, failure points, and safety profile can be observed in training and in operational outcomes. This provides outcome data for future modifications of the method.

Emerging literature points in the same direction. In a peer-reviewed study of a police training shift from pain-compliance tactics toward leverage-based control and de-escalation, Huff, Zauhar, and Agniel (2024) reported reductions in force severity, officer injuries, and significant subject injury following the new training model. Butler and Wang (2024) likewise found that officers who trained in Brazilian jiu-jitsu reported greater confidence in use-of-force performance, improved stress levels, and better perceived work performance. Practitioner-oriented reports from Marietta, Georgia, have described similar trends, including reduced Taser use and fewer injuries

among officers participating in department-sponsored BJJ training (City of Marietta, 2021). Although this literature is still developing and varies in methodological strength, it supports the broader proposition that structured, leverage-based control training may improve both performance and safety outcomes.

Legal Standards Governing Restraint-Related Use of Force in Colorado

Civil claims arising from police use of force are traditionally litigated under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, where the governing constitutional standard is objective reasonableness under the Fourth Amendment (*Graham v. Connor*, 1989). Courts evaluate reasonableness by considering the totality of the circumstances, including the severity of the offense, whether the suspect posed an immediate threat to officers or others, and whether the suspect was actively resisting or attempting to flee. Of these factors, courts consistently treat the immediacy of the threat as the most significant consideration.

Recent federal decisions addressing restraint encounters emphasize that force must diminish as control is achieved. In *Teetz v. Stepien* (10th Cir. 2025), the court held that a jury could find continued body-weight compression unconstitutional after a suspect had been handcuffed and no longer posed an immediate threat. Similarly, in *Krueger v. Phillips* (10th Cir. 2025), the court concluded that continued compressive force after restraint could be unreasonable when the suspect no longer presented an ongoing safety risk. These decisions underscore that force which may initially be justified can become unconstitutional if it continues after the threat has dissipated.

Colorado law now places additional emphasis on the consequences of such encounters. In 2020, the Colorado legislature enacted Senate Bill 20-217, which created a state constitutional damages action and eliminated qualified immunity as a defense to those claims (Colo. Rev. Stat. § 13-21-131). The statute also requires public employers to indemnify officers for most judgments arising from on-duty constitutional violations. As a result, the financial consequences of unreasonable force damages will likely fall on the employing agency.

This statutory framework alters the institutional incentives surrounding police use of force. Under federal § 1983 litigation, municipal liability typically requires proof of an additional agency defect such as unconstitutional policy or deliberate indifference in training (*Monell v. Department of Social Services*, 1978; *City of Canton v. Harris*, 1989). By contrast, Colorado's indemnification framework allows damages to be recovered once an officer's conduct is found unconstitutional, without requiring plaintiffs to prove a separate municipal policy or training defect. In practical terms, this structure increases the imminence of financial exposure of agencies when restraint encounters result in *avoidable* injury.

Colorado's criminal justification statute further reflects legislative concern about current restraint practices. Colo. Rev. Stat. § 18-1-707 requires officers to apply non-violent means when reasonably possible and authorizes physical force only when necessary to effect an arrest, prevent escape, or address an imminent threat. The statute also emphasizes minimizing the risk of injury during force encounters. Although criminal justification standards do not directly define constitutional tests of reasonableness, without a qualified immunity barrier, these standards may be presented to juries in evaluating the objective reasonableness of force under the new state

constitutional action.

Taken together, these legal developments heighten the importance of restraint methods that allow officers to reduce force once control has been achieved. When restraint encounters result in injury, courts and juries increasingly examine whether officers had the ability to modulate force as resistance diminished. In Colorado's current legal environment, restraint practices that make it difficult for officers to transition from force application to controlled custody may increase the risk of injury and expose officers and agencies to significant operational and financial consequences.

Structured Ground Control Principles

The operational and training challenges associated with grounded restraint highlight the importance of control structures that stabilize resistance before attempting mechanical restraint. In recent years, Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ)–influenced training has received increasing attention within policing for this reason. The Police Executive Research Forum (PERF)'s 2024 report on restraint-related deaths notes that grappling approaches derived from Brazilian jiu-jitsu may allow officers to control resisting subjects while maintaining them on their side rather than compressing the torso against the ground (PERF, 2024). Jiu-jitsu based methods emphasize positional control, leverage, and sequencing that separates the establishment of control from the application of restraint.

A central principle of BJJ is that control precedes submission or restraint. Practitioners first establish positional dominance by limiting an opponent's ability to generate force through the hips, trunk, and limbs. Only after movement is stabilized are finishing techniques attempted (Spanias et al., 2022). This sequencing contrasts with many prone restraint encounters, in which officers may attempt to pursue the application of restraint while the subject remains uncontrolled.

Many law enforcement defensive tactics programs now adapt BJJ principles to address this sequencing problem. Some systems of BJJ instruction now include techniques specifically designed for police control and restraint rather than sport competition. These adaptations typically organize control into step-wise procedures that sequentially stabilize the subject's limbs, base, and posture before attempting handcuffing. As discussed earlier, elevated emotional arousal can shift officer behavior toward rapid threat-driven reactions and away from deliberate cognitive control. Step-wise control procedures provide officers with a simple sequence of trained actions that can be executed even when cognitive bandwidth is reduced (Andersen & Gustafsberg, 2016). These structured sequences parallel decision frameworks such as PERF's Critical Decision-Making Model (CDM) and Integrating Communications, Assessment, and Tactics (ICAT) (Police Executive Research Forum, 2016b).

Leverage is another important feature of grappling-based control. By controlling limb position and body alignment, practitioners can restrict movement without relying on sustained compressive force on the torso. When resistance becomes mechanically inefficient, officers may be able to maintain control while using comparatively modest physical force. Maintaining lateral or supine control positions can also improve visibility of the hands and front waistband—areas frequently associated with weapon concealment (Pinizzotto et al., 2006; Johnson, 2007).

Finally, positions that stabilize resistance without compressive force may allow officers to use

time as a de-escalation tool. When movement is controlled, officers may have opportunities to attempt de-escalatory communication and allow emotional arousal to diminish before applying mechanical restraint. Research on stress and cognition suggests that short pauses can improve decision-making and communication during high-stress encounters (Andersen & Gustafsberg, 2016; PERF, 2016a). Control structures that create these opportunities may therefore support both safer restraint outcomes and improved officer decision-making.

These principles—positional control, leverage, visibility, structured sequencing, and the tactical use of time—are not intended to prescribe a single technique. Rather, they describe structural features of restraint systems that allow officers to establish control before attempting mechanical restraint. Methods built around these features can better align training with real-world resistance, reduce reliance on improvisation during dynamic encounters, and provide officers with procedural sequences that facilitate application of training methods under stress.

Administrative Implications and Conclusion

The analysis presented here highlights a structural limitation of prone restraint practices in policing. Because the prone position preserves multiple biomechanical pathways for resistance, officers often attempt to apply restraint before effective control can be established. The result is often an escalating struggle in which officers react to evolving resistance rather than follow trained content. This dynamic complicates training, limits the ability to practice under realistic resistance, and contributes to the variability observed in restraint encounters and, in rare cases, unintended critical outcomes.

Structured control systems influenced by Brazilian jiu-jitsu illustrate an alternative approach. By establishing positional control before attempting mechanical restraint, these systems separate the tasks of stabilizing resistance and securing custody. This sequencing allows officers to train against realistic resistance while maintaining acceptable safety margins during training. Structured control procedures may also help officers rely on trained motor patterns rather than stress-driven reactions when emotional arousal is high. Research on stress and police performance indicates that structured training protocols can improve officers' ability to maintain cognitive control and decision-making under pressure (Arnsten, 2009; Andersen & Gustafsberg, 2016). It also creates opportunities to rely on leverage rather than compressive force and may allow officers to use time and communication as tools for de-escalation.

These operational considerations take on added significance in Colorado's current legal environment. The elimination of qualified immunity for state constitutional claims and the statutory requirement that agencies indemnify officers for most judgments mean that restraint-related injuries may produce more direct financial consequences for police agencies than in the past (Colo. Rev. Stat. § 13-21-131). At the same time, recent federal decisions emphasize that force must diminish as control is achieved (*Teetz v. Stepien*, 2025; *Krueger v. Phillips*, 2025). Together, these developments increase the importance of restraint methods that allow officers to modulate the amount of force being applied.

The purpose of this analysis is not to prescribe a single technique for police restraint training. Rather, it highlights several principles that appear increasingly relevant to modern policing: establishing control before restraint, relying on leverage rather than compression, maintaining visibility of potential

weapon access points, and preserving time for communication and reassessment. Training systems built around these principles may better align police training with operational realities while reducing the degree to which officers must escalate unrehearsed force application during dynamic encounters.

Limitations

This analysis also recognizes some practical limitations. "Brazilian jiu-jitsu" is a heterogeneous label encompassing a range of technique emphasis and training approaches; not all gyms teach methods readily appropriate for law enforcement operations. Many sport-oriented programs emphasize competitive aggressiveness and finishing techniques such as chokes and carotid restraints that would be unlawful for use by Colorado officers (Colo. Rev. Stat. § 18-1-707 [2.5)(a), 2024. The discussion here therefore refers specifically to Brazilian jiu-jitsu curricula that emphasize positional control, de-escalation, and recognition of particular legal limitations of Colorado law enforcement.

Control methods that can be consistently taught, safely practiced under resistance, and clearly evaluated after incidents provide a stronger foundation for both officer safety and institutional risk management than approaches that depend heavily on unrehearsed improvisation and escalation commonly experienced during prone struggles.

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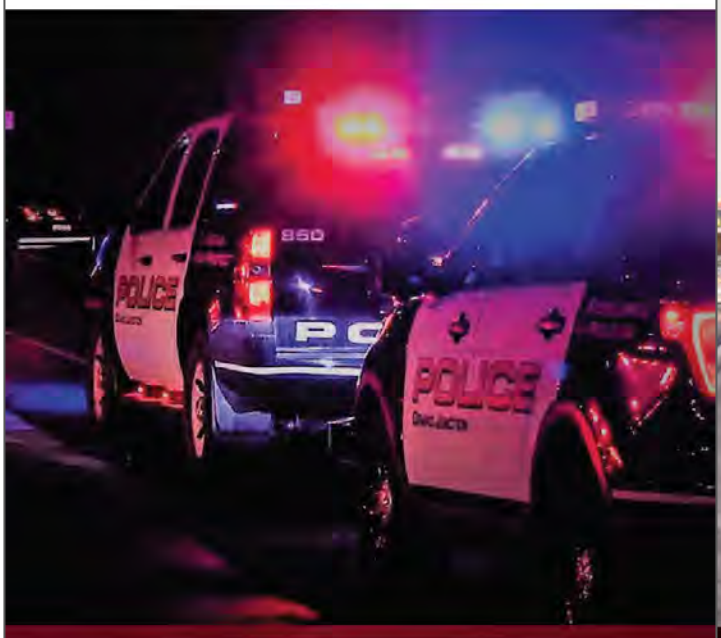

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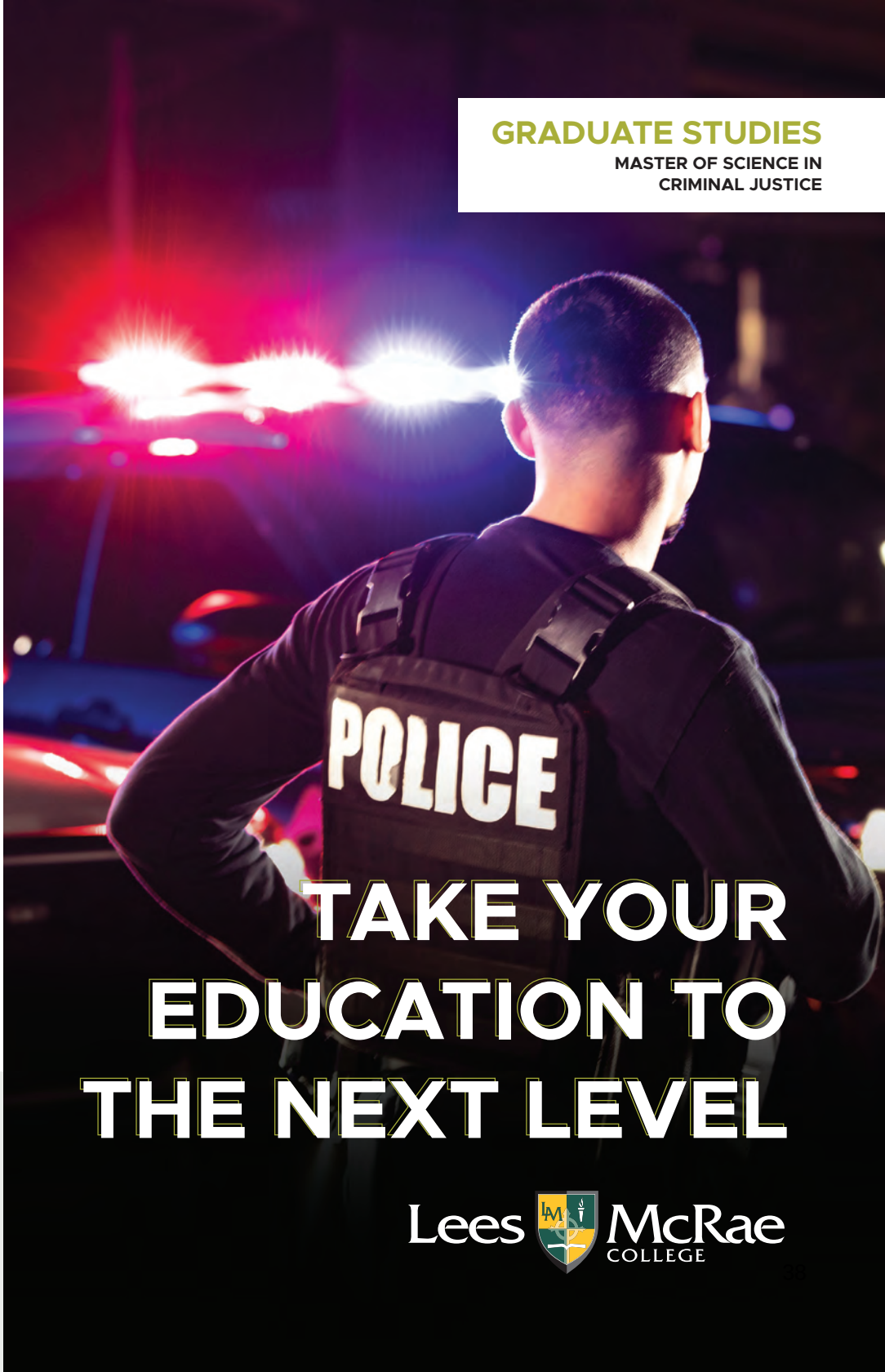

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