

# Burnout Prevention for Federal Probation and Pretrial Services Officers

Robert McMackin  
Aspire Health Alliance  
Joseph LaFratta  
Scelte Consulting

**THE TERM BURNOUT** has become ubiquitous, used freely to describe an assortment of conditions or presentations. Yet a point of agreement among its various uses is that it refers to a negative physical and/or emotional state marked by exhaustion. This is an exhaustion that is beyond fatigue and will not be cured by a good night's sleep. An exhaustion that can be bone-crushing, leaving the sufferer weary, depleted, and feeling alone. This sense of exhaustion is also noted in the burnout professional literature. In the models of burnout put forward by the principal theorists in the field (Maslach & Leiter, 1997, 2005; Demerouti & Bakker, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2002), exhaustion is the first factor noted in both burnout models. Both groups agree that it is an exhaustion brought on by intense cognitive, emotional, and physical job demands.

Maslach and Leiter (2021) describe two other burnout factors: 1) cynicism and a depersonalization or mental distancing from one's job and 2) reduced professional efficacy. Demerouti and Bakker have the additional factor of disengagement in their model of burnout, stating that they do not include a professional efficacy dimension as they view that as an outcome of burnout rather than a "core dimension" (Demerouti & Bakker, 2007).

For our work we have adopted the model of burnout put forward by Demerouti and Bakker for two reasons:

1. It can be measured by the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory, which is open access, and we were able to administer

it to federal probation and pretrial services officers.

2. It is linked to their Jobs Demands-Resources theory, which we have modified as a component in a model for a district level burnout intervention.

## Stress, Trauma Exposure, and Burnout

The impact of stress on health has long been recognized, being linked to a range of physiological and psychological states. Stress, particularly acute stress, sets off a strong hormonal response, which is a normal part of a stress adaptation. This activation typically "causes secretion of glucocorticoids, which act on multiple organ systems to redirect energy resources to meet real or anticipated demand" (Herman et al., 2016, p. 1). While such a stress reaction is adaptive when one has to gear up for an immediate response, such as fight or flight, it is maladaptive to have one's body frequently bathed in such hormones. *Allostatic load* is the term used to describe the cumulative stress we may experience. Arline Geronimus describes the effects of constant or repeated exposure to stress, including the stresses of poverty and racism, as leading to a premature aging or "weathering" of one's body (Geronimus et al., 2006).

It should also be remembered that our brains are a type of tissue, and Agnese Mariotti points out that "chronic stress is linked to macroscopic changes in certain brain areas, consisting of volume variations and physical modifications of neuronal networks"

(Mariotti, 2015, p. 2). Some stress is adaptive and helps us respond to threats or challenges we encounter, but as the 16th century physician Paracelsus explained—*anything in excess is poison*—and that is most assuredly true for stress.

As noted, the job of a federal probation and pretrial services officer as well as other frontline law enforcement officers is critical and by its nature exposes one to stress. Figley, who has researched the impact of stress on health care providers, identified "compassion fatigue" as an outcome of cumulative stress and described it as "the cost of caring" (Figley, 1995). For probation and pretrial services officers to be effective in their positions, they must pay the price of caring. The capacity for empathy allows one to connect with another in a human manner, to place oneself in the shoes of another. Yet this can also be a two-edged sword if one does not have good boundaries or good supervision. One's empathic capacity can be a contributor to or down payment on that cost of caring, leading to the exhaustion and disengagement of burnout.

Figley speculated that the exhaustion and disengagement one experiences in stressful professions may be protective coping mechanisms to help manage the emotional costs of working in such difficult situations. He called this "compassion fatigue." For example, an officer completing a presentence report on an individual charged with child pornography or sexual assault may have to view some of the evidence in the case, including videos of children being raped. It is not hard to imagine

how much tension viewing such material would create. A natural response would be for the officer to disengage or disassociate from the activity as a type of protective mechanism, or to simply become exhausted by the process. Additionally, viewing such material may trigger an understandably angry response in the officer, flooding the officer's body with the stress hormones mentioned above.

None of us live in a safe, frictionless world. Trauma exposure affects almost all of us. The Adverse Childhood Events (ACES) population study showed 61 percent of the U.S. population experiences an ACES, such as experiencing or witnessing abuse or neglect or having a close relative commit suicide (CDC, 2021) and the World Health Organization reported the general trauma exposure rate at over 70 percent (Kessler et al., 2017). The majority of us have some trauma exposure in our lives, and when one works in law enforcement there is an overlay of unavoidable trauma exposures. These exposures are unavoidable because they are part of the job. In a way they are exposures each person who entered the field signed up for when they took the job, likely without fully knowing their severity at the time. They are the unavoidable frictions of the profession, and at times the heat caused by such frictions may ignite.

A variety of terms have been used, frequently interchangeably, to describe the impact of being exposed to trauma through work. These terms generally include secondary trauma, vicarious trauma, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). An additional term not seen in the work stress or work trauma exposure literature, which we nonetheless consider important, is complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD), which refers to multiple trauma exposures. While often used interchangeably, these terms represent distinct psychological phenomena, and we propose they fall into two distinct exposure groupings: Indirect trauma exposure (secondary trauma & vicarious trauma) and direct trauma exposure (PTSD & C-PTSD).

Secondary trauma and vicarious trauma are considered indirect exposures because they entail being exposed to a traumatic event via the experience of another, where the professional develops similar symptoms to the clients. Most descriptions of secondary trauma stress the professional mirroring the client's PTSD symptoms, while vicarious trauma literature often notes enduring changes in the professional's cognitive or affective state. The descriptions of secondary trauma and

vicarious trauma strongly overlap, which is why many view the differences as semantic rather than actual.

PTSD and C-PTSD result from direct trauma exposure where one is exposed to potentially traumatic events either once or repeatedly through one's work. As mentioned earlier, if a probation officer is preparing a presentencing report on an individual who sexually assaulted a child, the officer may be required to view the evidence against the offender. Hearing a person describe being raped as a child is vastly different from viewing a ten-minute video of a child being raped or viewing two or ten or twenty such videos. Similarly, for a police officer to hear from another officer at shift change about a fatal accident they responded to is vastly different from that officer responding to a fatal accident.

The fatigue related to the indirect or direct trauma exposure related to work is gradual, as is the more enduring burnout resultant from those same exposures. It is the very gradualness of this progression which makes it so easy to miss for both supervisors and the officers themselves. We have all used the phrase describing someone as "a bit crisp around the edges." Unbeknownst even to ourselves, we are making an informal assessment of that colleague's burnout risk. It is an assessment generally made in jest, yet it is exceedingly, even deadly, serious, with law enforcement officers being 54 percent more likely to die of suicide than those in other professions (Voilanti & Steege, 2021).

The model of burnout we use in our work is based on the research of Demerouti et al. This model identifies two components to burnout: Exhaustion and Disengagement. They state, "Each burnout dimension is differentially related to specific short-term consequences of strain: Exhaustion is primarily related to mental fatigue, whereas disengagement is primarily related to satiation and the experience of monotony" (Demerouti et al., 2002, p. 423). Importantly, they identify four factors that are antecedents or precursors to burnout. These factors are:

1. *Mental Fatigue*: "The impairment of mental and physical functional efficiency, depending on the intensity, duration, and temporal pattern of the preceding strain." This impairment can eventually lead to poor performance, loss of concentration, and exhaustion.
2. *Monotony*: "A state of reduced activation (within the individual) which may

occur during repetitive task performance with a narrow field of attention under monotonous job conditions." Monotony can disappear with a change of activity.

3. *Satiation*: "A state of nervously unsettled, strongly emotional rejection of a (structurally) repetitive task or situation in which the experience is of 'marking time' or 'not getting anywhere.'" Like monotony, satiation can disappear with a change of activity.
4. *Stress Sensations*: These are "complex psycho-physiological reactions to unacceptable, conflicting, or especially threatening demands that may result from a perceived over- or under-load (e.g., time pressure), causing frustration of personal goals and aversive consequences." Long stress sensation can lead to "chronic stress sensations, exhaustion, shifts of the aspiration level, and finally to health impairments" (Demerouti et al., 2002, p. 425).

These antecedents to burnout can be seen in any profession, from a law enforcement officer to a factory worker. As with any precursor to illness, *an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure*. These potential burnout precursors provide us with a partial road map to the issues that should be addressed in a burnout prevention plan, which will be discussed later in this paper.

## Burnout Risk Among Federal Probation and Pretrial Services Officers

The Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI) is a sixteen-item questionnaire that examines the two-factor model of burnout (Demerouti & Bakker, 2007). Each item on the scale is composed of a statement that subjects respond to on a four-point scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree). Responses to eight statements form a disengagement subscale, and the other eight form an exhaustion subscale. The results of all sixteen items taken together form a full burnout scale. An example of a disengagement item is: "Lately, I tend to think less at work and do my job almost mechanically." An example of an exhaustion item is "During my work, I often feel emotionally drained" (MDApp, 2020).

In addition to the burnout scales, some OLBI items consider a person's degree of positive work engagement, which Schaufeli and Bakker view as the antithesis of burnout:

“burnout and engagement are considered each other’s opposites, particularly as far as exhaustion and vigor, and cynicism and dedication are concerned” (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004, p. 296). Items that tie into a subject’s positive engagement in work include: “I find my work to be a positive challenge” and “When I work, I usually feel energized” (MDApp, 2020).

As part of two Federal Judicial Center trainings the authors presented on developing a trauma-informed wellness program for U.S. probation and pretrial officers in 2021, participants were asked to complete the OLBI at the conclusion of the training. Participants came from federal probation and pretrial districts throughout the country, and no identifying information was asked except whether the person was an officer or a supervisor. Eighty-nine staff persons completed the inventory, including 48 officers and 41 supervisors. On the OLBI, a score below 1.63 represents low burnout risk, 1.64 to 2.67 represents moderate risk, and above 2.68 represents high burnout risk. Table 1 shows the OLBI scores for officers and supervisors.

**TABLE 1**  
**Oldenburg Burnout Inventory Scores**

	Officers	Supervisors
Full Scale	2.52	2.45
Exhaustion	2.59	2.53
Disengagement	2.45	2.38

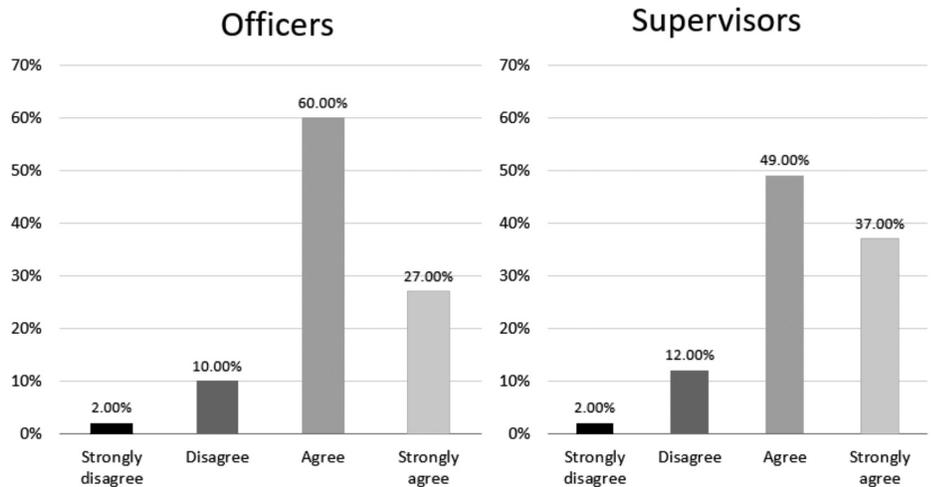
The Oldenburg scores clearly show both officers and supervisors scoring at the upper end of the moderate burnout risk area. Yet even more striking was the response pattern on individual items. On the Exhaustion Scale, a strong majority of officers (87 percent) and supervisors (83 percent) agreed or strongly agreed with the following statement, “Over time one can become disconnected from this type of work.” Additionally, 58 percent of officers and 61 percent of supervisors agreed or strongly agreed with, “After my work, I usually feel worn out and weary.” The respondents almost universally agreed that the responsibilities of an officer can take a toll, that they may be subject to that toll to some degree, and that some already feel the price. Yet equally striking was how positively engaged most were in their work, with 85 percent of officers and 75 percent of supervisors agreeing with “I can tolerate the pressure of my work very well,” and 81 percent of officers and 83 percent of supervisors agreeing with “Usually, I can manage the amount of my work well.”

The results on the Disengagement Scale were equally striking. A majority of respondents acknowledged some degree of disengagement, with 54 percent of officers and 44 percent of supervisors agreeing with the statement “It happens more and more often that I talk about my work in a negative way,” and 44 percent of officers and 59 percent of supervisors agreeing with the statement “I feel more and more engaged in my work.” Yet, while acknowledging how one can become disengaged from the work of a federal probation and pretrial services officer, 72 percent of officers and 95 percent of supervisors agreed that “I find my work a positive challenge,” and only 28 percent of officers and 44 percent of supervisors agreed with the statement, “Lately, I tend to think less at work and do my job almost mechanically.”

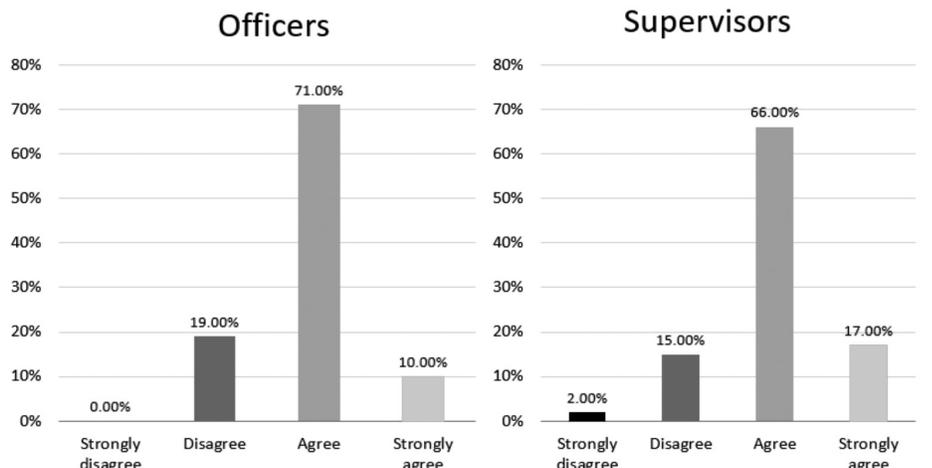
The overall scores of federal probation

and pretrial services officers show a group of individuals in a high-risk job that can take a toll on them both physically and mentally. Nonetheless, the vast majority of officers are highly committed to their positions and find their work a positive challenge in which they can take pride. Still, it must be remembered that all things distribute normally; while the majority of officers appear to do well in their positions from a burnout perspective, a sizeable minority, likely in the 10 percent range, are struggling to some degree. It should also be remembered that while the majority appear to be doing well, all remain at risk due to the stresses of the job and all can benefit from a work environment that actively tries to prevent burnout.

**Over time, one can become disconnected from this type of work.**



**Usually, I can manage the amount of my work well.**



## The Job Responsibilities-Resources Model

Nearly all jobs have performance expectations for employees, and hopefully there are also resources available to help the employees meet those expectations. Expectations and resources are in a delicate balance that is not always in synch—at times the demands may be too high and the resources too low or vice versa.

The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model suggests that all professions have demands that can become risk factors, leading to job stress or strain, as well as resources that can become protective factors, mitigating against such stress. Job demands may be broadly viewed as “The physical, psychological, social, and organizational aspects of a job that requires sustained physical, cognitive,

and emotional effort and skill” (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 312). Job resources are those “physical, psychological, social and organizational aspects of the job that are either/or: functional in achieving work goals; reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs; stimulate personal growth, learning, and development” (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 312). Demands can be viewed as a positive challenge or a negative hindrance. Resources should help one meet demands, thus lowering the potentially toxic effects of demands.

Generally, when people accept a job, they also agree to a job description that outlines their responsibilities. By willingly accepting that job, the person also accepts all of its related responsibilities. As a result, the onus of fulfilling those responsibilities falls

upon the employee, with the employer having the responsibility of providing the resources required in order for the employee to be successful in fulfilling those duties. Therefore, we have modified the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model to the Job Responsibilities-Resources (JR-R) model. We view this as giving the employee greater personal agency as one who is fulfilling responsibilities, not meeting demands. It is akin to those who have experienced significant trauma viewing themselves as survivors rather than as victims of trauma. Additionally, we believe this model places the employer and employee on a more equal footing, with shared responsibilities and accountability.

The JR-R model does not reduce the risk of stress on a job and potential burnout. Responsibilities with inadequate resources remain a recipe for disaster: a type of unfunded mandate that an employee may never be able to get out from under and the weight of which may eventually be crushing.

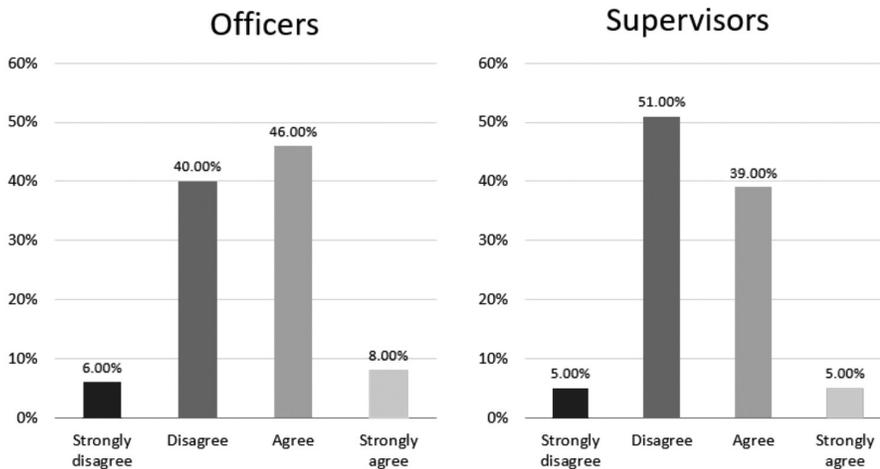
## Developing a Burnout Prevention Plan

The two-factor model of burnout identifies exhaustion and disengagement as the dominant features in burnout. This model identifies four precursors to burnout: mental fatigue, monotony, satiation, and stress sensations. Unsurprisingly, research has indicated a strong correlation of exhaustion with mental fatigue and stress sensations, and disengagement with satiation, monotony and stress sensations, although all four burnout antecedents contribute to each factor. Figure 1 (next page) shows the relationship of the two burnout factors to the four burnout antecedents (Demerouti et al., 2002).

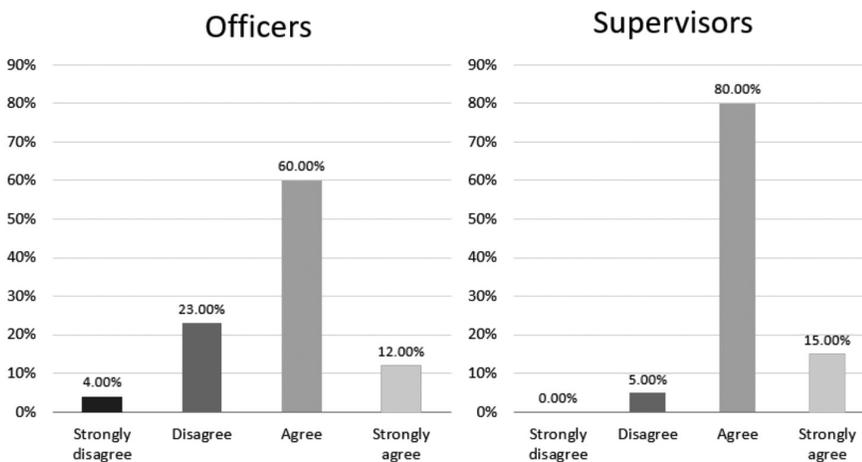
Understanding the relationship of the four antecedents to burnout is important, as it provides a partial blueprint for the areas that should be addressed in a burnout prevention plan. The remaining elements of that blueprint are provided by examining those job resources that mitigate the negative impacts of the four burnout antecedents, specifically social support, autonomy, a positive supervisory relationship, and constructive performance feedback (Bakker et al., 2005). It is our experience that a clear and shared mission among all staff, officers and supervisors is an additional stress-mitigating factor for those in the law enforcement field.

Bakker et al. have noted that autonomy is the protective factor that most fully buffers job demands and “The level of exhaustion and of

It happens more and more often that I talk about my work in a negative way.



I find my work to be a positive challenge.



cynicism was elevated particularly when job demands (work overload, emotional demands, unfavorable work conditions, and work-home interference) were high and job resources (autonomy, social support, high quality relationship with the supervisor, and performance feedback) were lacking” (Bakker et al., 2005, p. 176). While Bakker et al. refer to job demands, we prefer to focus on job responsibilities, seeing all the job demands mentioned above, except for work-home interference, as related to the employee’s job responsibilities and factors the employee should have some ability to address within a healthy work environment. The employee should also be able to address work-home interference, but we consider that a factor that may be addressed as part of a personal wellness program.

At times wellness programming can be seen as a way to promote a healthy workplace environment and reduce the risk of burnout. While we agree with this, we view most wellness programs as highly individually based and often containing only one factor directly related to one’s work (occupation) and up to seven factors not related to one’s work environment (e.g., finances, environment, social, etc.). We believe positive wellness should be promoted as a complement to a workplace burnout prevention plan.

We will outline the five steps we consider critical to developing a burnout prevention plan for a federal probation and pretrial district based on the two-factor model of burnout. We recommend consultation be used

to implement this plan.

- Step 1: The first step is a full department training (officers, supervisors, & support staff) on the stresses inherent in their jobs. This training would look at the responsibilities of all staff, skills or competencies required to perform the various jobs, types of trauma and stress that one encounters in their role, an understanding of direct and indirect trauma exposure, ways of managing stress related to such exposure, and an understanding of how the workplace can be affected. At the conclusion of the training, the group will be asked to complete the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory.
- Step 2: The second step is a training with the same group. The two-factor model of burnout is presented with a discussion of the OLBI results for the group. The mission of the district and the responsibilities of all staff are discussed. The four antecedents that contribute to burnout are discussed, as are the four mitigating factors and the importance of a clear mission. The group considers and lists resources they believe can be implemented to reduce stress related to the four burnout precursors.
- Step 3: The third step is a meeting with supervisory staff to evaluate which resources could be enhanced to reduce the burnout risk for staff, allowing them to fulfill their responsibilities most effectively.
- Step 4: The fourth step is for a burnout prevention plan to be presented to the full staff based on the feedback from support staff,

officers, and supervisors. Modifications to existing protocols are discussed (e.g., a possible change in the on-call schedule, caseload expectations).

- Step 5: The final step calls for a quarterly meeting with supervisors and officers to review how the burnout plan is being implemented. An annual on-site review meeting with the full staff is recommended.

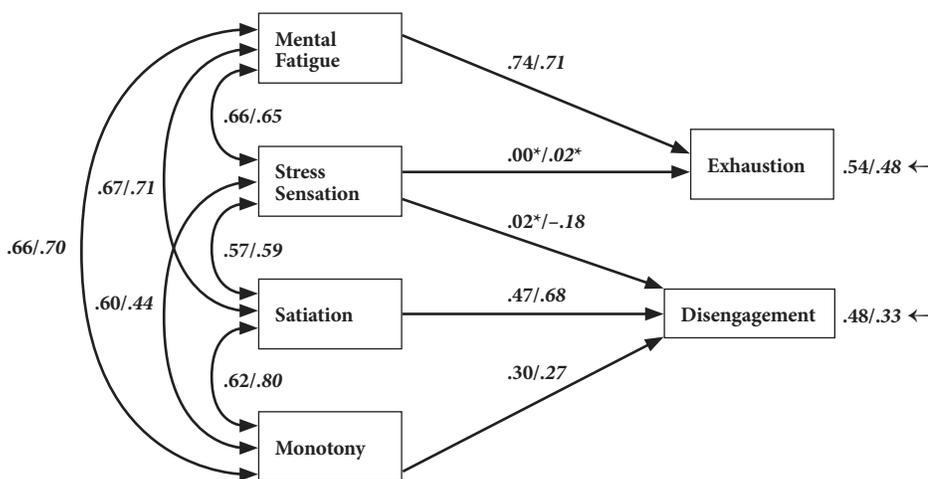
The process outlined above is designed to be both informative and inclusive. For it to be successful, there must be a common understanding among all staff of the stresses of the job, the responsibilities and expectations for both officers and supervisors, and the resources available to fulfill such responsibilities.

### Conclusion

Federal probation and pretrial services officers and others in law enforcement serve in critical occupations designed to support the welfare and betterment of the wider community. They also serve in occupations where they are exposed to traumatic material that is unavoidable, as it is a function of their jobs. It is not a situation where *what does not break you makes you stronger*. None of us are immune to the impacts of traumatic exposures, and cumulative exposures only intensify the effects; they do not mitigate them. It is normal to want to reduce the stress of such exposures, and this can be done in a positive manner by talking with friends and colleagues, focusing on the positives of the job and the successes, good supervision, or healthy humor. But it can also be done in unhealthy manners such as by excessive substance use, aggressive behavior, cynicism, or dark humor.

Those who have entered the fields mentioned above have voluntarily assumed the responsibilities inherent in their jobs, yet they also deserve the resources required to do their job and to not become physically or psychologically damaged in the process. Burnout is a term referring to the exhaustion and disengagement individuals may develop over time due to the stresses of certain jobs. While this burnout for many may be a protective mechanism to dampen the impact of the traumas to which one is exposed, it is not a healthy coping mechanism. In law enforcement, it is the responsibility of the supervising agencies for whom officers work and for the entire communities whom they serve and protect to develop interventions and resources that lessen the impact of those factors known to contribute to burnout. This paper outlines a

FIGURE 1.



Standardization solution of the model of short-term effects of strain and burnout for human service professionals (N = 149) and production workers (N = 145; in italics). All parameters, except those marked with an asterisk (\*), are significant at the p < .05 level.

burnout protection plan for federal probation and pretrial services officers, but it can also be adapted for other law enforcement or courthouse occupations that tend to be high stress.

## References

- Demerouti, E., Bakker, A. B., Nachreiner, F., & Ebbinghaus M., (2002). From mental strain to burnout. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 4, 423-441.
- Demerouti, E., & Bakker, A. B. (2007). *The Oldenburg Burnout Inventory: A good alternative to measure burnout (and engagement)*. Utrecht University and Erasmus University Rotterdam.
- Bakker, A. B., & Demerouti, E. (2006). The Job Demands-Resources model: State of the art. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 22(3), 309-328.
- Bakker, A. B., Demerouti, E., & Euwema, M. C. (2005). Job resources buffer the impact of job demands on burnout. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 10(2), 170-180.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (April 6, 2021). Preventing adverse childhood experiences [Violence Prevention | Injury Center] CDC. [www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/fastfact.html?CDC\\_AA\\_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fviolenceprevention%2Ffacestudy%2Ffastfact.html+%29](https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/fastfact.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fviolenceprevention%2Ffacestudy%2Ffastfact.html+%29).
- Figley, C. R. (1995). Compassion fatigue as secondary traumatic stress disorder: An overview. In C. R. Figley (Ed.), *Compassion fatigue: Coping with secondary traumatic stress disorder in those who treat the traumatized* (pp. 1-20). New York, NY: Brunner-Routledge.
- Geronimus, A. T., Hicken, M., Keene, D., & Bound, J. (2006). "Weathering" and age patterns of allostatic load scores among Blacks and Whites in the United States. *American Journal of Public Health*, 96(5), 826-833.
- Herman, J. P., McKlveen, J. M., Ghosal, S., Kopp, B., Wulsin, A., Makinson, R., Scheimann, J. Myers, B. (2016). Regulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical stress response. *Comparative Physiology*, 6(2), 603-621.
- Kessler, R. C., Aguilar-Gixiola, S., Alanso, J., Benjet, C., Bromet, E., & Cardoso, G. (2017). Trauma and PTSD in the WHO World Mental Health Surveys. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, Vol. 8.
- Mariotti, A. (2015). The effects of chronic stress on health: New insights into the molecular mechanisms of brain-body communication. *Future Science OA*, 1(3).
- Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. P. (1997). *The truth about burnout*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. P. (2005). Understanding the burnout experience: Recent research and its implications for psychiatry. *World Psychiatry*, 15(2), 103-111.
- MDApp. (2020). Oldenburg Burnout Inventory. <https://www.mdapp.co/oldenburg-burnout-inventory-olbi-calculator-606/>.
- Schaufeli, W.B., & Bakker, A.B. (2004). Job demands, job resources and their relationship with burnout and engagement: A multi-sample study. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 25, 293-315.
- Voilanti, J. M., & Steege, A. (2021). Law enforcement worker suicide: An updated national assessment. *Policing*, 44(1), 18-31.