

## THE POWER OF FAITH, FAMILY AND CULTURE: KEYS TO LOW SUICIDE RATES AND MENTAL RESILIENCE IN LAW ENFORCEMENT

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### Abstract

This qualitative study examines the factors contributing to low suicide rates and mental resilience of police officers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, a province impacted by terrorism and revolt. This study used Interpretivism as a research philosophy, which allows the exploration of subjective meanings in the social context. Using saturation principle of sampling, we collected data through unstructured in-depth interviews from 20 police officers and analyzed their lived experiences through interpretative phenomenological analysis. Findings highlight religious faith, particularly Islamic beliefs and spiritual practices, as central to resilience, providing psychological relief and a sense of purpose. The strong family bonding emerged as an important factor for ensuring emotional stability and financial security. The collective cultural identity and stoicism, accompanied by community support and peer-brotherhood, also strengthen mental toughness of police officers. Though study provide valuable insights into mental resilience of police force in terrorism and trauma affected region, the region-specific focus limit the generalizability. Future research should aim to explore broader populations and develop mental health interventions in culturally tailored similar contexts.

### INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, suicide among police personnel has become an emergent concern worldwide. In countries like the United States and across Europe, mental health issues and suicide rates within law enforcement have reached alarming levels (Lawrence & Dockstader, 2024). Studies over the past five years have concluded that police forces in the US are more likely to die by suicide than by line of duty (Lawrence & Dockstader, 2024). Data from Blue H.E.L.P. revealed that 500 police officers died by suicide in the US between 2018 and 2023 (Blue H.E.L.P., 2023). Similarly, European countries have reported elevated suicide rates in police departments, highlighting mental health issues and inadequate support (Henkel & Vandvelde, 2021). Policing services are among the major occupational groups

with higher suicide rates than those of the general population (Peterson et al., 2020).

These high suicide rates are attributed to various job stresses inherent in police work (Zimmerman et al., 2024). As first responders, police officers routinely face criminal situations, dangerous criminals, witness victims, suffering, and human losses, resulting in high levels of stress (Papazoglou & Andersen, 2019). Over time, these exposures can lead to emotional exhaustion, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and depression (Violanti & Steege, 2020). Limited access to mental health resources and stigma surrounding psychological help compounded these stressors (Papazoglou & Andersen, 2019). Additionally, the working environment demands displays of strength and resilience, making it difficult

for officers to admit vulnerabilities and further intensifying mental health struggles (Eurofound, 2020).

Police stress is broadly categorized into occupational and operational stressors (Violanti et al., 2017; Shane, 2010). Occupational stressors refer to job demands, such as exposure to traumatic crimes, long hours, and threats to health (Acquardo et al., 2022; Violanti et al., 2016, 2017). Operational stressors relate to the internal matters of police departments, including a lack of autonomy, strict bureaucracy, and poor communication (Acquardo et al., 2022; Purba and Demou, 2019). Additionally, stressors can be acute, involving short-term incidents such as shooting, or chronic, arising over time, such as work shifts (Violanti et al., 2018; Metcalfe & Dick, 2000).

In stark contrast to these trends, the police force in Pakistan presents notable differences. The number of suicides from January 1, 2019, to December 31, 2020, was only 22 in the entire country (Naveed et al., 2023). Pakistan, the fifth most populous country in the world and the second in Southeast Asia, has a population of 235.82 million in four provinces: Punjab, Sindh, Baluchistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and other administrative areas (Naveed et al., 2023). Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which has faced 7,894 terror attacks since 2000 (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2024), is the most traumatized and volatile region; however, suicide rates among police officers are remarkably low (Naveed et al., 2023). These reported traumatic events have profoundly disrupted daily life, instilling fear and insecurity while sparking national mourning and political discourse as communities grapple with the aftermath of violence and loss (Warraich et al., 2023). During the last decade, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has suffered adversely as a result of the increasing militancy and its war against terrorism. The entire province has seen the worst ever terror's attacks, affecting almost every area and sector of the province (Ali, 2024). As first responders to terror attacks and crimes, police officers often support traumatized victims, making them highly susceptible to post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) (Baloch et al., 2021), yet they handle professional hardships courageously (Naveed et al., 2023).

The aforementioned low suicide rate among police personnel in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa raises a critical and important question: What factors contribute to this extraordinary and resilient low suicide rate? To answer this question, this study attempts to explore the major factors contributing to the low suicide rate and unusual resilience of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa police. Specifically, the role of religion (Islam), strong family bonding, cultural norms, and community brotherhood are explored, as these major factors contrast with the Western world (Fasogbon et al., 2019; Khan & Anwar, 2022).

### Literature review

In the contemporary world, high suicide rates among police personnel and their health issues are growing concerns for police departments, as well as for psychological and behavioral researchers (Zimmerman et al., 2024). Police officers are immensely affected by mental health problems, resulting in suicidal ideation and suicide as prominent consequences (Zimmerman et al., 2024). Over the last decade, in the United States, police officers have been more likely to die by suicide than by line of duty (Violanti et al., 2019). As per the data compiled by Blue H.E.L.P. from 2018 to 2023, over 500 police officers have died by suicide (Blue H.E.L.P., 2023). This highlights the urgency to explore and solve mental health problems within law enforcement.

Research on suicidal thoughts and behaviors revealed that, compared to the general public, police officers experienced almost twice the rate of suicidal ideation (Stanley et al., 2016). Thoen et al. (2020) reported that 12.4 percent of police officers expressed a likelihood of suicide attempts in the future, and 13.2 percent had suicidal thoughts in recent years. Several job-related factors trigger these tragedies in police personnel, including repeated exposure to threatening incidents, virulent crimes, handling victims of crimes, straining work shifts, sleep patterns and relationships, and ready access to firearms (Dixon, 2021). Moreover, police culture discourages expressions of vulnerability and intensifies the issue by making it harder for officers to seek psychological help when required (Papazoglou & Andersen, 2019). Officers may feel agitated that disclosing mental issues will have career

repercussions, discouraging them from seeking psychological support (Papazoglou & Andersen, 2019).

Of the broader debate on mental health issues, suicidal behaviors pose a considerable concern for nations (Di Nota et al., 2020). Data from the Office for National Statistics (UK) bulletin on suicides by occupation showed that 21 serving police officers died by suicide per year in the UK (Nasir et al., 2021). The increased risk of suicidal thoughts and suicide among police officers may be explained by the interpersonal-psychological theory of suicide (Joiner, 2005; Van Orden et al., 2010) and Klonsky and May's (2015) three-step theory. Both theories appear to be suitable explanations for understanding how police officers develop progressive suicidal behaviors. First, suicidal ideation begins with feelings of pain and hopelessness. Second, low connectedness leads to suicidal ideation and suicidal planning. Third, suicide attempts are based on contributory factors (Klonsky & May, 2015). A suicide attempt might occur when an officer with suicidal ideation has a motivational stimulus and the capacity to act out plan (Klonsky and May, 2015). Although suicide rates among police officers in the U.S. and European countries remain high, the police force in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, is a distinct anomaly (Naveed et al., 2023). This stark contrast prompted behavioral and psychological researchers to investigate the major factors contributing to the high level of resilience among the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Police. Emerging research suggests that religion and faith may play a protective role in law enforcement in mitigating suicide risk (Fasogbon et al., 2019). Emphasis on endurance, patience, and the blessedness of life by religious beliefs of Islam is embedded in the personal and professional lives of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa police officers (Khan and Anwar, 2022). In Pakistani society, more specifically in Pakhtun society, family is the primary source of emotional support. A close-knit relationship with family offers emotional stability and security in difficult times of police officers' distress (Khan and Anwar, 2022). In contrast, these protective factors are almost absent in Western countries (Dixon, 2021), explaining the anomaly in low suicide rates among police personnel. Exploring and

understanding these factors may provide valuable insights into the development of suicide prevention strategies in police departments globally.

### Method

This study followed a research onion by Saunders (2007), using Interpretivism as a research philosophy, which allows the exploration of subjective meanings in the social context. This study employed a monomethod qualitative design to gather responses using unstructured in-depth interviews. To capture the participants' lived experiences, a phenomenological strategy was adopted for a cross-sectional time horizon. The study ensured the consent and confidentiality of the participants.

### Selection of participants

The saturation principle of sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Fusch & Ness, 2015), which focuses on data collection until the emergence of new themes, was used to select the participants. This approach is well-matched for interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), as it emphasizes richness and depth of data rather than the number of participants (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Following Moustakas (1994) in phenomenological research, a sample of 20 participants was selected for in-depth inquiry. The data were explained using the steps outlined by Hycner (1985) and Groenewald (2004), ensuring the holistic experiences of the participants rather than breaking their responses into discrete components.

The interviewing procedure

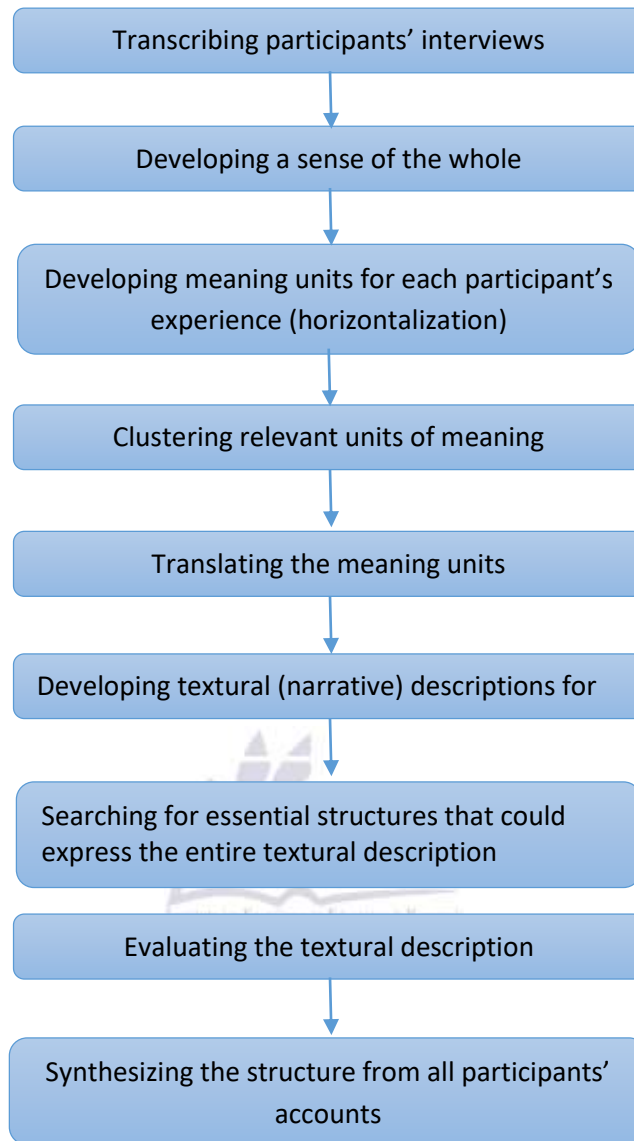


Figure 1: Procedural Steps of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

To explore the lived experiences of police personnel in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the following nine steps of IPA were carried out and are presented in figure 1: (a) transcribing interviews, (b) developing a sense of the whole, (c) developing meaning units for each participant's experience, (d) clustering relevant meaning units, (e) translating the meaning units, (f) developing textural descriptions, (g) searching for essential structures that could express the entire description, (h) evaluating the textural descriptions,

and (i) synthesizing the structure from all participants' accounts.

**(a) Transcribing participants' interviews**

The interviews were transcribed word for word to preserve the participants' real expressions and experiences. These transcriptions helped identify recurring themes related to mental resilience, providing a rich source of data for analysis.

**(b) Developing a sense of the whole**

By conducting each interview multiple times, a comprehensive sense of the experiences of the participants was developed. This holistic review highlighted the major factors that contribute to a low suicide rate.

**(c) Developing meaning units for each participants’ experience (horizontalization)**

The narratives of each participant were broken down into meaning units. These meaning units comprised Islamic faith, family bonding, cultural heritage, and support from the community.

**(d) Clustering relevant meaning units**

The meaning units were clustered into four broader themes: (1) religion and faith, (2) strong family bonding, (3) cultural resilience, and (4) community support.

**(e) Translating the meaning units**

Here, each meaning unit was further interpreted to explain the detailed insights.

**(f) Developing textural (narrative) descriptions for each individual**

Narrative descriptions were generated for each theme. These narratives explain how religious practices, family and relationships, cultural norms, and community brotherhood keep the police emotionally strong.

**(g) Search for essential structures that can express the entire textural description**

The essential structures were identified and interlinked, supporting each other and creating a holistic system of support against suicidal ideations.

**(h) Evaluation of textural description**

All textural descriptions were evaluated, which showed that the major factors were consistently mentioned in all interviews.

**(i) Synthesizing the structure from all participants’ accounts**

Finally, all textural descriptions were synthesized with a cohesive understanding of the phenomenon.

**Findings**

Interpretative phenomenological analysis of participants’ interviews revealed four major protective factors (superordinate themes): religion and faith, strong family bonding, cultural norms, and peers’ community support. These major factors, illustrated in Table 1 as superordinate and subordinate themes and depicted in figure 2, include sub-dimensions (subordinate themes) that are deeply embedded in officers’ lives. Collectively safeguarding them against suicide and suicidal ideation.

**Table 1. Superordinate and subordinate themes**

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Religion and Faith	Islamic beliefs Spiritual practices Sense of purpose
Family bonding	Emotional support Financial stability Family honor
Cultural resilience	Historic adaptability Collective identity Stoicism
Community support	Peer encouragement Mutual trust Police brotherhood

**Religion and Faith**

Religion and faith are the most pervasive and significant factors influencing police officers’ mental resilience in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Islamic teachings and their emphasis on the sanctity of life were central to participants’ worldviews, providing a

spiritual and moral framework that discouraged thoughts of self-harm and suicide. The officers described a deep connection between the Islamic belief system and their professional roles, offering them a sense of responsibility and purpose. Their duties as protectors of the public and society are

outlined as religious deeds and

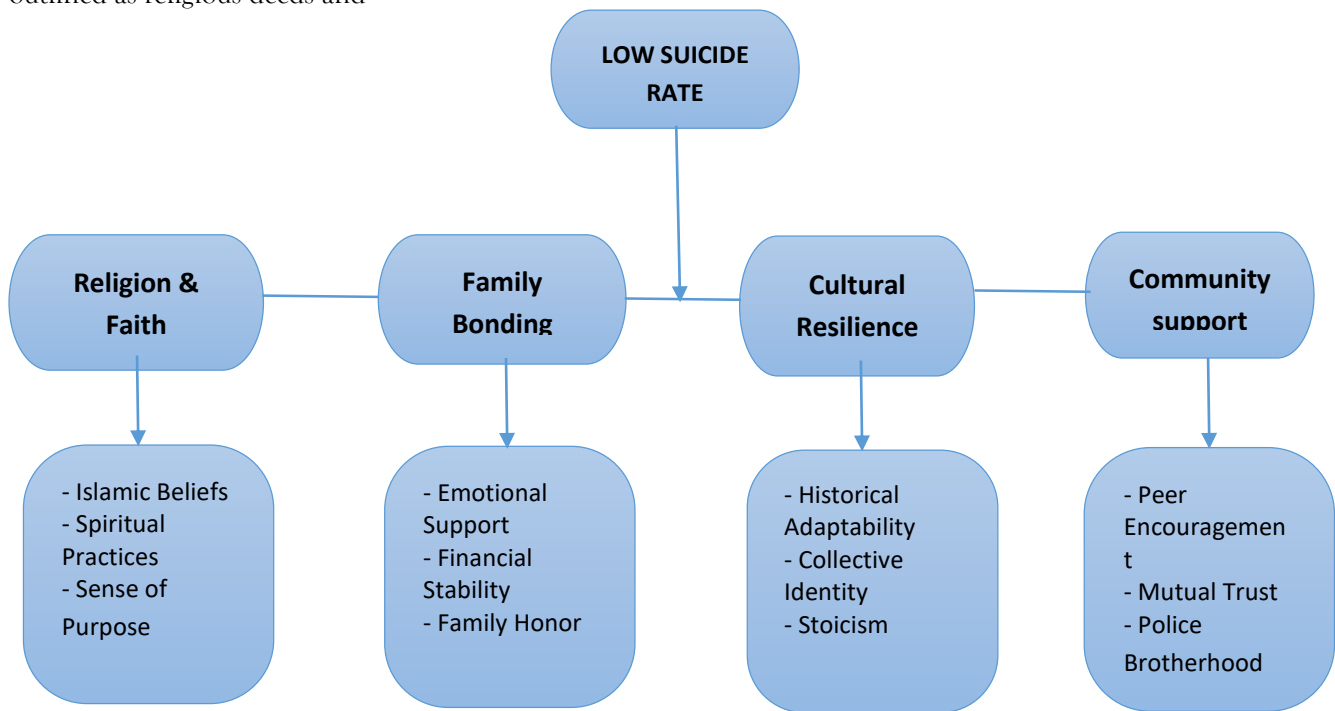


Figure 2: Factors and Sub-dimensions

**Obligations that align their professional roles with Islamic values.**

Officers imitated their professional hardships as a belief in Jihad al-Nafs: the spiritual fight against hardships and problems. They view their protective roles as worship, and their services as divine obligations, developing resilience against trauma, stress, and danger. The sense of amanah (trust) in Islam further strengthens their commitment to protecting innocence, upholding justice, and shielding their mental health. Officers’ beliefs, faith, and mindset demonstrate how religion provides existential motives and a moral basis in their personal and professional lives. Belief in religion among the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa police offers a more diverse approach than Western psychological coping methods, where treatments such therapy and counselling are in practice (Taghavi and Segalla, 2023). This belief not only provides emotional support, but also serves as a deterrent against self-harm, suicidal ideation, and suicide, as these actions are strictly prohibited in Islamic law. The protective

feature of religion emphasizes cultural strategies, particularly in regions where religion is considered the base of personal identity and social life.

**Family bonding**

The second important element that plays a major role in officers’ resilience is family bonding and relationships. The structure of family units, embedded in the social fabric, provides psychological and emotional support to officers. Officers mentioned the importance of their families in helping them maintain their mental health throughout their careers. This family orientation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is a critical source of support and moral responsibility, emphasizing feelings of purpose and solace. In contrast, individualism is more prevalent in Western countries (Lomas et al., 2023). Emotional support is an important component of family bonding. Offices may relax with family members in the comfort of their homes after lengthy and hectic duty hours. Officers described their familial space as a nonjudgmental

setting, where they expressed their feelings and emotions, and received support and empathy. Families support them in managing professional stress and anxiety. This emotional and psychological support enables officers to cope with the trauma and stress they experience in their jobs. Financial stability is another important element of family bonding, as officers are the sole breadwinners of the family. The officers described their financial responsibility as a motive for their lives. They consider their income essential to the well-being of their dependents, instilling a sense of purpose in life. This role of the family's breadwinner strengthens their willingness to cope with professional issues and enables them to understand their perseverance and keep their families moving. This financial role reinforces their mental resilience and aligns their professional determination with the security of their family. The concept of *izzat* (honor) has emerged as an additional crucial factor, contributing to and reinforcing officers' mental resilience. In the Pashtun culture of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, family honor is deeply rooted in familial and social relationships. Officers described maintaining a family reputation and honor as their responsibility, which extends beyond individual well-being. The prospect of dishonor through suicidal ideation and suicide was considered a serious repercussion for their families as a whole. One officer stated that "My entire family depends on me, so thinking about harming myself is just like I am hurting them too. The act of suicide will not only affect them emotionally but also disgrace them and dishonor family reputation." This mindset and way of thinking shows the importance of familial responsibilities, compelling them to uphold their resilience. The community in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa views the family as a unit that is interdependent and that shares responsibilities. Similarly, officers have strengthened their resilience through interwoven family systems. On the other hand, Western societies place higher value on individual autonomy (Lomas et al. 2023). Western approaches emphasize self-care in mental health treatment (Halim & Ghani, 2023). In conclusion, the collective orientation of the family in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa stabilizes officers' lives and provides emotional support to handle the demands of their professions.

### **Cultural resilience**

The collective identity and historical background of cultural heritage appear to be key factors of resilience. The sense of identity as Pashtuns and the brought up of officers are shaped by cultural experiences of hard times and adversity. Officers described their cultural longstanding ability to resist and survive hardships as a source of a collective sense of resilience. They consider struggles and hardships part of a broader narrative of perseverance that provides a psychological buffer against professional stress and trauma. A strong connection between their personal experiences and cultural heritage enables them to be united and perceive their struggles as part of a collective triumph of culture. Officers, as custodians of this cultural legacy, strengthen their capacity to tolerate both individual and professional hardship. A common theme in the interviews was stoicism, as officers explained how they were trained to remain emotionally stable in adverse situations. This stoic attitude was not only considered a personality trait or psychological characteristic; rather, it was viewed as a sign of the strength and societal norm of their culture. The cultural ethos in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa emphasizes collective emotional restraint, which contrasts with Western nations that encourage emotional expression and open discussions about struggles and hardships (Theron & Ungar, 2023). Western societies define psychological resilience as self-care, emotional transparency, and therapeutic engagement (Raghavan & Sandanapitchai, 2024). However, resilience in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is strongly embedded in a shared identity that provides a solid basis for mental strength. One of the officers summed up this component of culture as, "We all are raised to be strong in hard times. We were instructed that being weak and whiny would be unacceptable in our culture. We must remain resilient for the sake of family and community." This stoic attitude enables officers to perceive hardships as a collective accountability and promote cultural ideals of perseverance.

### **Community support**

The fourth factor that strengthened mental resilience among the police was community support. Officers mentioned this as a strong interpersonal bond that created unique communal ties between their peers.

They consider this communal bonding an extension of their families, supporting them emotionally and psychologically against the stressors of their jobs. In contrast to the Western compartmental and professional relationships among police forces, the sense of both professional and cultural values indulges the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa police to prioritize collective responsibility. Their mutual awareness of professional hardships and risks enables them to provide relatable guidance and sympathetic emotions. As a result, the entire police department serves as a network of emotional safety.

Peer encouragement is one of the main components of this support network. Officers frequently emphasized how they depended on one another for both emotional and practical assistance. Peer support fosters an atmosphere in which officers can open their vulnerabilities without worrying about criticism. In contrast to Western policing cultures, where hyper-masculinity may inhibit emotional manifestations of suffering (Mawby, 2023), police officers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa described a system of mutual dependence in which asking for aid was not stigmatized. The officers believed that this team approach was essential to their mental health, since it gave them a kind and encouraging atmosphere.

Throughout the interviews, the idea of ‘police brotherhood’ continued. This phrase was often used by officers to characterize the thoughtful feelings of loyalty and trust that characterized their interactions with colleagues. In addition to being a professional network, this fraternity also served as a second family member. Officers described this brotherhood as a source of feeling responsibility for their coworkers' mental health, as well as for their own. Officers can easily request support and assistance without worrying about being inept or weak. On the other hand, police culture in Western countries stigmatizes officers' acknowledgement of mental health problems among officers (Whitaker, 2023).

Officers explained that brotherhood and mutual interdependence are viewed as assets rather than weaknesses. One officer said that “the police force was a second family. We share our struggles and burdens. I can ask my peers for help and support whenever I face stress or problems. I do not feel isolated because of my sense of brotherhood and trust.” This statement emphasizes emotional support, along with logistical and tactical assistance among police forces.

### Conclusion

This qualitative study offers critical insight into the mechanisms underlying low suicidal ideation and suicide rates. Despite prolonged exposure to trauma and terrorism, police officers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa had remarkably low suicide rates. This phenomenological study uncovered four major protective mechanisms: religion and faith, family bonding, cultural resilience, and community support, which protect officers from the psychological effects of professional stressors. Islamic beliefs and spiritual deeds have emerged as the most important sources of psychological resilience among the fundamental components. Faith provides a sense of solace, and spiritual activities provide comfort during difficult times and collectively act as a buffer against the stressors of the profession.

In addition to religion and faith, family bonding is also important for ensuring emotional stability and financial security. The strong family system encourages the protection of family honor and enables officers to divert thoughts self-harming towards the responsibilities of the family. These findings also reflect the role of cultural resilience in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's historical heritage and cultural identity. Police officers exhibit stoicism, which helps them withstand professional stressors. Similarly, peer camaraderie and solidarity promote an environment of shared experiences and mutual trust, providing extra layers of mental shields. This phenomenological study provides a comprehensive understanding of how police officers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa internalize these protective elements. This study not only adds to the body of knowledge available on the mental issues of high-risk professionals, but also emphasizes the need for contextual and cultural mental health policies. To

further increase the resilience of any demographic, this study provides guidance to legislators and law enforcement organizations for the acknowledgement of these elements. Furthermore, this study emphasizes the handling of stigma associated with psychiatric care through culturally integrated and peer-led therapies for honoring officers' beliefs and values. The findings of this study have implications for high-stress professions worldwide.

### Practical implications

This phenomenological study has important implications for enhancing the mental resilience of law enforcement personnel. The cultural and religious beliefs of personnel must be embedded in mental health treatment and therapy. Religious practices and faith should be focused on as a source of resilience that Western treatment might not resonate with in mental health therapies. Globally, faith-based approaches, such as religious guidance and spiritual counseling, might offer a religiously and culturally congruent approach to mental health treatment. The critical role of family bonding in promoting emotional stability highlights the need to develop family friendly policies. This might help to reduce officers' professional and personal stress. The promotion of family well-being through family focused mental health education, flexible hours, and counselling for officers and their families is possible. This qualitative research provides a solution for stigma related to professional psychological treatment, which might be handled by informal peer support programs. These informal programs may enable officers to manage and reduce suicidal thoughts. The significance of culturally competent solutions, which has been formed by the history of hardship in their area, is further highlighted. Law enforcement departments can incorporate cultural and historical narratives into their training programs, thereby reinforcing a sense of collective identity. This cultural competence can also inform retention strategies, ensuring that officers who embrace cultural values thrive in high-stress roles. The findings indicate that resilience is not merely an individual trait, but is deeply embedded within religious, cultural, and social contexts, suggesting that future policies and interventions should focus on these collective factors.

### Limitations and directions for future research

Future research should address the limitations of this study by employing a mixed-methods approach. Combining qualitative and quantitative studies provides a more comprehensive understanding of police officers' mental health and suicide risk factors. Longitudinal studies can also be used to track changes in mental resilience and protective factors over time. Additionally, examining the variations in resilience across different regions can provide further insights. Comparative studies of police forces in other volatile regions may also help identify universal and context-specific factors that contribute to mental resilience. Finally, future research should focus on developing and testing culturally informed mental health interventions that integrate identified protective factors such as religion, family, and community support into structured programs for officers facing high-stress environments. Understanding how these factors can be leveraged or enhanced could be vital for improving mental health outcomes and reducing suicide rates across high-risk professions.

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