

# Using Police Performance Evaluations to Screen for Moral Injury as a Precursor for PTSD

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## THE ISSUE

- Public safety personnel, including police officers, are more likely to encounter psychologically traumatic events on the job, leading to depression, anxiety, burnout, and PTSD (Arble et al., 2017; Di Nota et al., 2021).
- In addition to the physically demanding nature of their work, when asked to do what is right, police officers may face moral issues resulting in moral distress or moral injury (Papazoglou et al., 2020).
- Because burnout, moral injury, and PTSD may appear similar and have severe consequences, it is critical to understand the relationship between the three and what can be done to screen for them.

## FOUNDATIONS

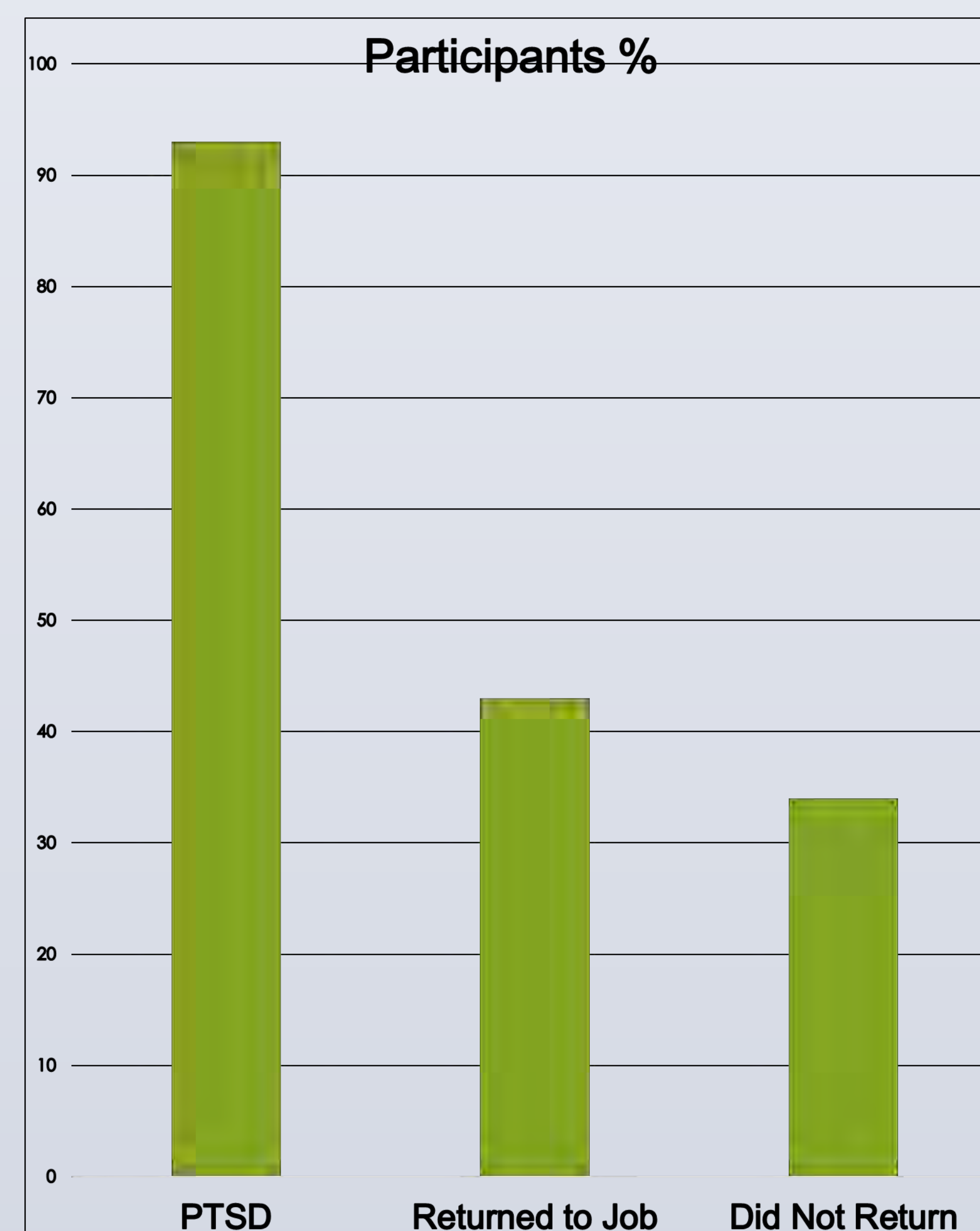
- Burnout—typically characterized by exhaustion, ongoing job stress resulting in error, depersonalization, and disengagement—focuses on the individual whereas moral injury underlines the responsibility of the system in which the individual operates (Haight et al., 2017; Weingarten et al., 2020).
- One of moral injury's components -- betrayal from someone in a position of authority in a high stakes situation -- clearly recognizes the role of the system (Shay, 2014).

## PREVALENCE

- In veterans and active military service members, moral injury was common for those with PTSD, and repeated exposure to incidents of moral injury led to PTSD (Koenig et al., 2018; Papazoglou et al., 2017; Shay, 2014).

## PREVALENCE (cont.)

- Similarly, re-experiencing of the event(s), avoidance or numbing behaviors, anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances can be linked to both moral injury and PTSD (Arble et al., 2017; Shay, 2014).
- In a study of non-military work-related PTSD, though 93% of those received treatment for PTSD, only 43% returned to their previous job within which the inciting event had occurred (74% of those returned with some job modification), and 34% did not return to work (Torchalla & Strehlau, 2018). See figure below.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Without an accurate distinction between burnout, moral injury, and PTSD, it is not possible to provide the appropriate support and interventions for individuals, and employee retention and morale suffers.

## RECOMMENDATIONS (cont.)

- Integrating appropriate assessment questions and broad-based wellness goals into regular performance evaluations within the police force provides an opportunity to screen for burnout and moral injury, with the goal of preventing PTSD.
- Van Thielen et al. (2018) found that Human Resource Management (HRM) system theory and the Job Demand Control model allowed for a specific evaluation system for police that increased job satisfaction while lowering job strain.
- Utilizing a goal-setting process allowed for communication of clear expectations from the department for jobs largely performed on the streets with minimal supervision, allowing employees to feel a sense of self-control, increasing a sense of well-being (Van Thielen et al., 2018).
- By including psychologists and expanding the definition of well-being to include not just self-control, but other assessment-based questions and behaviors, departments and supervisors can screen for burnout and moral injury.
- Integrating wellness goals and having specific questions regarding commonly identified behaviors including those that can be signs of burnout or moral injury including substance use, isolating from friends and family, and not connecting with positive support can begin to screen for warning signs (McCormack & Riley, 2016).
- Such efforts should improve police officers' well-being and increase safety in the community.

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