

Custodial Death and Its Psychological Impact On Police Officers: A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract

The present study explored the emotional, psychological, and occupational impact of a custodial death incident on police personnel using a qualitative, interview based approach. Narrative accounts were collected from ten officers across different ranks, genders, and years of service within the Law and Order division. Thematic analysis revealed four major themes: emotional and psychological distress, work related pressure and occupational fear, impact on personal and social life, and secondary trauma within the departmental environment. Participants described intense fear of legal consequences, heightened anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and physiological symptoms such as disturbed sleep and reduced concentration. Work routines became marked by hypervigilance, procedural caution, and a decline in professional confidence. Stress extended into personal domains through social withdrawal, family worry, and reduced self assurance. A key finding was the presence of secondary trauma among officers who were not directly involved, reflected in a tense station atmosphere and diminished morale. The study highlights that custodial deaths exert a broad emotional impact across entire police units. The findings emphasize the need for trauma informed support, structured counselling, leadership sensitivity, and clear post incident protocols within policing systems.

Keywords: Police personnel, custodial death, psychological distress, secondary trauma, thematic analysis

1. Introduction

Custodial environments represent one of the most psychologically challenging settings within policing, and officers who work within these spaces often experience intense emotional, professional, and social pressures. The qualitative accounts from officers in the present dataset illustrate how custodial deaths trigger a wide range of psychological reactions, affecting not only the officers directly involved but also those who are indirectly exposed to the incident. Officers with long service histories reported that custodial incidents evoke fear, anxiety, and continuous mental strain because of the possibility of suspension, legal consequences, and public criticism. One officer with twenty one years of experience explained that cases involving custodial deaths create significant stress, disturb emotional balance, and influence both personal and family life (Ashok, Personal Communication, 2025)

The pressure placed on officers increases when custodial incidents receive media attention or provoke public reaction. Several officers described that even routine work becomes stressful after such cases because they feel closely monitored by senior officials and the public. A Grade One officer noted

that following a recent custodial death, new procedural changes and heightened expectations from higher authorities created fear among staff, making even simple policing tasks feel emotionally burdensome (Hadham, Personal Communication, 2025). These accounts show that custodial incidents can disrupt everyday functioning and reduce operational confidence within the department.

Lower ranking officers reported additional emotional challenges. One constable stated that although the hierarchy requires them to follow orders, they experience fear and mental tension when a custodial death occurs, especially because such incidents draw departmental inquiries and public scrutiny. He explained that these situations damage public trust and increase mental stress, particularly when colleagues avoid discussing the incident openly (Soundar, Personal Communication, 2025). Another officer described disturbed sleep, reduced focus, and emotional exhaustion, emphasising that the stress of handling such cases persists even after the incident is legally resolved (Suresh, Personal Communication, 2025).

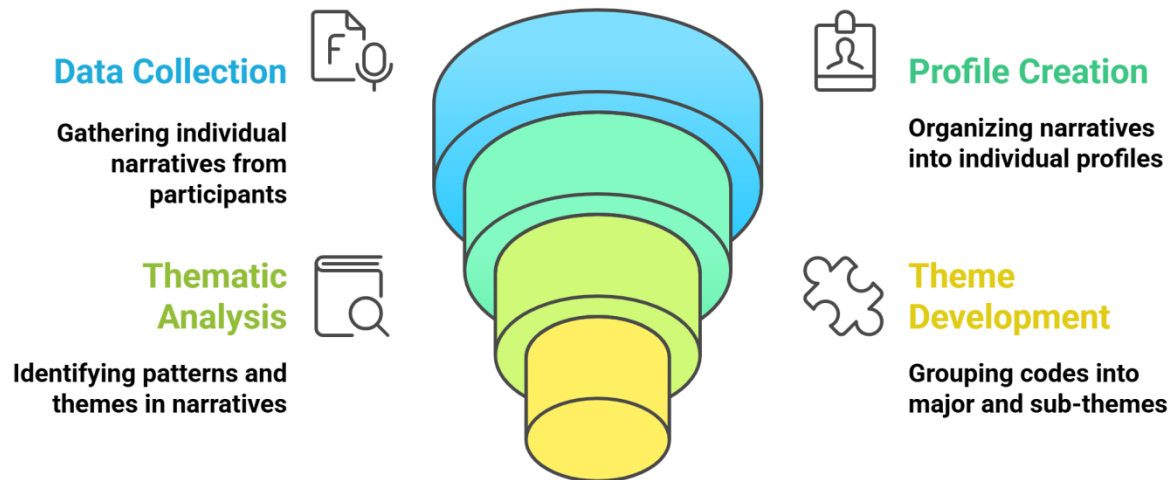
Female officers in the dataset reported strong emotional responses even when they were not directly involved in the custodial death. One officer expressed feeling ashamed to wear her uniform and reported overthinking, fear of making mistakes, and a sense of being judged by society because of the incident. She emphasised the need for counselling and peer support to manage these emotional pressures (Uma, Personal Communication, 2025). Another female officer discussed anxiety, reduced focus, and increased caution in custody related procedures due to fear that any error could lead to further problems (Mahalakshmi, Personal Communication, 2025). Senior officers also described significant emotional burdens. One station in charge explained that although he had no direct involvement, he felt responsible for the incident and experienced embarrassment, stress, and concern for departmental reputation. He observed that indirect exposure created secondary trauma among his team and affected overall morale (Guna, Personal Communication, 2025). Collectively, these firsthand accounts demonstrate that custodial deaths generate widespread emotional, cognitive, and social strain across all ranks. The findings highlight the importance of psychological support systems, structured counselling, and resilience training for officers working in high pressure custodial environments.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To explore the emotional, psychological, and occupational impact of a custodial death incident on police personnel through a thematic analysis of their firsthand narratives, and to identify the patterns of stress, secondary trauma, and changes in departmental climate that emerge from their experiences.

METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the emotional, psychological, and occupational impact of a custodial death incident on police personnel. A narrative qualitative approach was selected because it allows participants to express their lived experiences in detail, capturing the depth and complexity of their emotional responses. The sample consisted of ten police officers working in the Law and Order division, representing different ranks, genders, and years of service. Participants ranged in age from 30 to 52 years and had between 9 and 25 years of experience in policing.



Data were collected through detailed narrative accounts provided by each participant. These individual accounts formed the basis of the study and were later organised into Participant 1 to Participant 10 profiles. Each profile contained descriptions of personal reactions, work-related pressures, and emotional consequences experienced after the custodial death incident. The inclusion of individual participant cases enabled the study to capture variations in experiences while identifying shared psychological patterns across officers.

The narratives were analysed using a thematic analysis approach. Coding was conducted manually, beginning with line-by-line reading to extract meaningful statements related to emotions, occupational stress, and departmental climate. Codes were then grouped into broader patterns, resulting in the development of four major themes and ten sub-themes. Ethical considerations were maintained by anonymising all participant data and ensuring confidentiality throughout the study.

PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS AND CONTEXT

Participant 1

Participant 1, a **50 year old male officer**, described custodial incidents as emotionally overwhelming, creating intense fear, anxiety, and stress. Despite over two decades of service, he explained that the fear of suspension, legal action, and public scrutiny remains constant. He reported mental exhaustion and stated that the stress spills over into his family life. Even when procedures are followed correctly, he feels personally responsible if anything happens to an accused in custody. He added that repeated exposure to such incidents makes officers emotionally drained within a few days. He also shared that lack of timely support increases feelings of helplessness during high-pressure situations.

Participant 2

Participant 2, a **40 year old male officer**, expressed that officers with fewer years of experience face greater mental strain during serious incidents. After a recent custodial death, he observed department-wide fear and increased pressure due to new procedural rules. He explained that even simple tasks felt stressful because of heightened responsibility and strict scrutiny from senior officers. He noted that pressure from superiors can affect efficiency and confidence during routine duties. He also reported that a single mistake from one officer can affect the reputation of the entire department.

Participant 3

Participant 3, a **50 year old male officer**, reported that lower-ranking personnel experience severe stress when custodial deaths occur because they must follow orders without having decision-making power. He noted that departmental inquiries begin immediately, creating a tense environment, while public distrust adds to emotional strain. He mentioned that colleagues avoid discussing such incidents openly, increasing feelings of isolation. He stated that the fear of being held accountable for actions beyond their control is constant. He also highlighted that media attention makes officers more cautious and emotionally burdened.

Participant 4

Participant 4, a **35 year old male officer**, stated that dealing with custody-related procedures after the incident caused high levels of stress. He experienced sleep disturbance, irregular appetite, and difficulty focusing. The constant media presence and pressure from the accused's family intensified his worry. He emphasized that the emotional burden continues long after the case is over. He shared that fulfilling responsibilities becomes harder when the mind remains preoccupied with fear. He also mentioned that although officers maintain emotional control, internal stress continues affecting performance.

Participant 5

Participant 5, a **52 year old female officer**, shared that some custodial deaths happen due to medical complications, yet officers still face severe emotional and legal pressure. She experienced anxiety, disturbed sleep, and reduced concentration. Public distrust and media attention made the situation psychologically heavier. She also reported inadequate emotional support from higher officials. She added that officers involved in initial handling carry heavy responsibility and fear future consequences. She noted that personal life becomes affected when constant thoughts about the incident disturb daily functioning.

Participant 6

Participant 6, a **30 year old female officer**, was not directly involved in the incident but felt deep emotional impact after hearing about it. She described sadness, fear, and helplessness, along with a sense of social judgment. She avoided wearing her uniform in public and felt the station atmosphere become silent and tense. She reported overthinking and fear of mistakes, expressing a strong need for counselling support. She explained that public perception made her feel ashamed despite having no involvement. She stated that emotional fragility increased and affected her confidence at work.

Participant 7

Participant 7, a **47 year old male officer**, experienced nervousness, embarrassment, and anxiety even without direct involvement. He reported disturbances in sleep and emotional exhaustion. Public judgment and media attention made him feel constantly watched. The tense and cautious station atmosphere contributed to significant secondary trauma. He noted that he began doubting his decisions at work, fearing small mistakes could escalate. He also shared that constant mental pressure made everyday duties feel more burdensome.

Participant 8

Participant 8, a **32 year old female officer**, described increased fear while handling suspects after the incident. She felt emotionally tense, overly cautious, and hyper-aware to avoid errors. Her family frequently expressed concern about her wellbeing, adding to her emotional pressure. She stated that the incident highlighted the heavy ethical and emotional burden of policing. She also explained that

she became more alert and hesitant when dealing with custody. She noted that the incident's impact continued to influence her mindset for several days.

Participant 9

Participant 9, a **46 year old female officer**, reported that public criticism heightened her stress and made her feel judged while wearing her uniform. She experienced anxiety, social withdrawal, and disturbed sleep. Routine duties felt riskier, and the station environment became heavy and emotionally draining. The incident intensified her fear of performing custody-related duties. She added that public anger made her feel unsafe even outside work. She also stated that minor tasks felt emotionally loaded due to the existing tension.

Participant 10

Participant 10, a **46 year old male officer** in a leadership role, felt strong moral responsibility and embarrassment due to the incident despite not being directly involved. He reported that public perception and departmental expectations created emotional pressure. He experienced sleep disturbances and emotional fatigue, and observed widespread anxiety and silence among staff, indicating secondary trauma within the station. He stated that he constantly worried about departmental reputation. He also explained that fear of judgment affected his confidence as a leader.

RESULTS

A thematic analysis of the ten participant narratives was conducted to identify patterns in their emotional, occupational, and personal experiences following the custodial death incident. The analysis produced **four major themes**, each containing distinct sub-themes that reflect shared experiences across participants.

Theme 1: Emotional and Psychological Distress

This theme captures the immediate emotional shock and ongoing psychological strain experienced by officers, including fear, anxiety, embarrassment, and physiological symptoms of stress.

Table 5.1: Sub-Themes Under Emotional and Psychological Distress

Sub-Theme	Description
Fear of legal or departmental action	Participants feared suspension, charges, or blame even when following proper procedure.
Emotional overload and exhaustion	Officers experienced overwhelming sadness, helplessness, and emotional burnout.
Disturbances in sleep, appetite, and focus	Insomnia, reduced appetite, poor concentration, and constant intrusive thoughts were commonly reported.

Table 1 presents the key emotional and psychological responses observed across participants. The sub-themes show that officers experienced a combination of fear-based reactions and stress-induced physiological symptoms. The table mentions how the incident created ongoing emotional strain that affected both their mental and physical wellbeing.

Theme 2: Work-Related Pressure and Occupational Fear

This theme reflects how the custodial death heightened pressure within the workplace, increased scrutiny from senior officials, and made even routine activities feel risky and stressful.

Table 2: Sub-Themes Under Work-Related Pressure and Occupational Fear

Sub-Theme	Description
Increased procedural and supervisory pressure	Officers felt more closely monitored and faced stricter procedural expectations.
Hypervigilance while handling detainees	Participants became overly cautious due to fear of unexpected health complications or allegations.
Stress in routine policing tasks	Even simple duties such as documentation or basic case handling became emotionally taxing.

Table 2 presents the occupational changes officers experienced after the incident. The sub-themes illustrate a rise in procedural pressure and heightened caution, showing how the work environment became more stressful, rigid, and demanding. The table demonstrates the shift from normal task performance to anxiety-driven hypervigilance.

Theme 3: Impact on Personal and Social Life

This theme captures how the stress from the incident extended beyond the workplace and affected officers' personal relationships, daily functioning, and interactions with the community.

Table 3: Sub-Themes Under Impact on Personal and Social Life

Sub-Theme	Description
Social withdrawal and avoidance	Officers avoided public spaces and felt uncomfortable wearing uniforms due to fear of public judgment.
Family worry and emotional burden	Families expressed fear and concern, often increasing emotional pressure on the participants.
Overthinking and reduced self-confidence	Participants experienced persistent worry, fear of mistakes, and reduced self-assurance.

Table 3 shows how the incident impacted officers' personal and family lives. The sub-themes reveal that emotional strain carried over into their homes and social environments, leading to withdrawal, family distress, and reduced confidence. This table highlights the broader psychosocial effects beyond the professional setting.

Theme 4: Secondary Trauma and Departmental Climate

This theme addresses the indirect emotional impact experienced by officers who were not directly involved in the incident, reflecting collective trauma and a shift in the departmental atmosphere.

Table 4: Sub-Themes Under Secondary Trauma and Departmental Climate

Sub-Theme	Description
Tense and silent departmental atmosphere	The station environment became unusually quiet, tense, and emotionally heavy.
Secondary trauma without direct involvement	Officers experienced distress simply from hearing about or being associated with the incident.
Reduced morale and perceived responsibility	Participants felt decreased motivation and a sense of collective obligation or guilt.

Table 4 shows how the custodial death affected the overall climate of the department. The sub-themes indicate a widespread emotional impact, even on those not involved in the incident. This demonstrates the presence of secondary trauma and highlights how the incident disrupted morale, peer interactions, and the general work environment.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the emotional, psychological, and occupational effects of a custodial death on police personnel. The findings demonstrate that such incidents create immediate and sustained emotional distress, consistent with broader research showing elevated stress, anxiety, and trauma among police officers exposed to critical events (Queirós et al., 2020; Violanti et al., 2017). Participants reported fear of suspension, legal consequences, and public criticism, reflecting patterns noted in studies where officers experience heightened vulnerability after high-risk incidents (Daniel et al., 2021; Ogińska-Bulik, 2022). Physiological symptoms such as disturbed sleep and reduced concentration also align with existing literature on trauma responses in policing (Hofer et al., 2021).

Work-related fear increased noticeably after the incident. Participants described heightened procedural pressure, close supervision, and hypervigilance while handling detainees patterns similar to findings that organisational stressors, policy changes, and administrative scrutiny can be as distressing as operational dangers (Gavin, 2025; Alves et al., 2023; Di Nota et al., 2024). The shift from routine policing to fear-driven caution observed in this study reflects established evidence that organisational climates significantly influence officer wellbeing (Violanti et al., 2017).

The incident also affected officers' personal and social lives. Social withdrawal, emotional fatigue, and heightened family concern mirror findings that police stress frequently spills into family relationships and reduces social functioning (Saunders et al., 2019; Occupational Stress in Police, 2023). Public scrutiny emerged as a major stressor, consistent with studies showing that negative media attention increases self-doubt and emotional strain among officers (Tucker et al., 2022; PoliceCare UK, 2024).

A key outcome was the presence of **secondary trauma**, where officers uninvolved in the incident experienced distress simply through association. This aligns with evidence that vicarious trauma affects law enforcement personnel even without direct exposure (Perez et al., 2010; Office for Victims of Crime, 2016; Williamson, 2020). The tense station atmosphere and reduced morale described by participants are consistent with organisational trauma patterns reported in policing (Bosma, 2021; Mulcahy, 2024). Therefore, the findings reinforce the need for structured mental health support, peer networks, and trauma-informed organisational practices within police departments.

CONCLUSION

The study showed that a custodial death incident triggered significant emotional, psychological, and occupational distress among police personnel. Officers experienced fear, anxiety, hypervigilance, and disrupted sleep, while also facing increased procedural pressure and heightened public scrutiny. These stressors influenced both professional functioning and personal life, creating spillover effects such as social withdrawal and family concern. A crucial finding was the prevalence of secondary trauma among officers who were not directly involved, mentioning that the emotional impact extends across the entire department. The study underscores the need for trauma-informed support systems, routine psychological services, and organisational strategies that prioritise officer wellbeing following high-stress incidents.

LIMITATIONS

- (1) The study was based solely on interview narratives from ten participants, which limits broader generalisation.
- (2) Findings reflect the perspectives shared during interviews and may not capture variations across other units or contexts.
- (3) The analysis focuses on reactions to one custodial death incident, without long term follow up or comparison cases.

IMPLICATIONS

- (1) Police departments should introduce regular counselling and psychological support after critical incidents.
- (2) Leadership must adopt supportive communication to reduce fear and blame within the organisation.
- (3) Training programs should include emotional resilience, stress management, and trauma awareness.
- (4) Clear post-incident procedures are needed to reduce uncertainty and strengthen officers' confidence.

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