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‘Growing old gracefully on the thin blue line’: a preliminary examination of ageing and its impact on police officers

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ABSTRACT

Ageing in high-risk occupations, such as policing, presents unique challenges and opportunities. This study examines the experiences of NSW Police Force (NSWPF) officers aged 50 and above to understand how ageing impacts job performance, safety, and wellbeing. Using a qualitative case study approach with semi-structured interviews ($n = 36$), thematic analysis identified key themes: physical and psychological wellbeing, workplace role adaptability, institutional support, and retirement considerations. Findings highlight cumulative physical injuries, psychological strain, and technology challenges, alongside enhanced communication skills and mentorship roles as important issues in the ageing process within policing. Recommendations from the study therefore incorporate flexible roles, wellness programs, and more support with retirement planning. The study underscores the need for workforce strategies that support ageing officers globally, ensuring sustained expertise and public safety. These findings contribute to broader discussions on age diversity and sustainable workforce management in high-risk professions.

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Ageing workforce; police wellbeing; workplace diversity; occupational health; mentorship; workforce sustainability

Introduction & background to the study

Research on the wellbeing of police officers has grown substantially over the last decade (Birch, 2016; Birch et al., 2017; Craven et al., 2020; Galovic et al., 2016; Vickers et al., 2014), however, much of that research has focused on new recruits and early-career officers, with older police officers often overlooked, in particular with regards to how the ageing process affects them in their job. The research presented sought to readdress this imbalance and inform research-derived operational and organisational strategies for supporting the ageing workforce in policing, recognising the wealth of knowledge, skills and experience older police officers can offer the workplace.

The role of a police officer is demanding – physically, mentally and emotionally (Birch, 2016; Birch & Herrington, 2011; Birch et al., 2017, 2021; Galovic et al., 2016; Vickers et al., 2014), while the ageing process is recognised to affect an individual’s physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing (Pressman et al., 2020), yet little is known

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of this impact on policing. Ageing in high-stress professions, such as policing, presents unique challenges and opportunities that impact both individual officers and the broader workforce. The global trend of an ageing population is reflected within law enforcement, where officers often continue to serve well beyond the age of 50. This demographic shift has significant implications for how police forces operate, support their staff, and maintain public safety. Previous studies in occupational health, gerontology, and organisational psychology have explored the physical, cognitive, and psychological effects of ageing on professionals. Despite this, limited research exists on how these factors specifically impact police officers aged 50 and above.

Age diversity in the workplace

Age diversity involves the inclusion of employees across a range of age groups within the workforce, fostering a multi-generational environment. In the context of today's rapidly evolving labour market, the relevance of age diversity has grown as more individuals extend their working lives into older age (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). The literature on age diversity in the workplace, encompassing studies by Hertel et al. (2013), George et al. (2024), and Backes-Gellner and Veen (2013), provides a nuanced understanding of how age diversity influences collaboration, communication, and productivity. Hertel et al. (2013) identify that age diversity can present challenges in communication and collaboration due to generational differences in work styles and values. However, they also emphasize that when these challenges are effectively managed, age diversity can enhance creativity and problem-solving capabilities within teams. The strength of this study lies in its focus on barriers to effective intergenerational collaboration, though its lack of longitudinal data limits the understanding of how these dynamics evolve over time.

Building on this, George et al. (2024) highlight the role of strategic practices, such as reverse mentoring, in fostering intergenerational collaboration, which can significantly boost workplace innovation and productivity. This study is particularly valuable for its practical recommendations, although its applicability may be somewhat limited due to its focus on Western contexts, potentially reducing its relevance in more culturally diverse settings. Backes-Gellner and Veen (2013) contribute large-scale empirical evidence on the impact of age diversity on company productivity, arguing that its effects are contingent on the nature of the tasks performed. Their findings indicate that age diversity positively influences productivity in companies engaged in creative tasks, while it may hinder productivity in companies focused on routine tasks. The strength of this study lies in its robust empirical approach and the development of a theoretical framework that integrates diverse research findings. However, the study primarily addresses the economic impacts of age diversity, leaving the psychological and social dimensions less explored.

In summary, such evidence underscores that age diversity in the workplace can either challenge or enhance communication, collaboration, and productivity, depending on its management. Generational differences can create barriers, but effective management strategies can unlock the benefits of diverse perspectives, particularly in creative and complex tasks. For police officers, these insights

highlight the importance of implementing thoughtful strategies to leverage the strengths of an age-diverse workforce. This understanding sets the stage for a discussion on age diversity management strategies, which are essential for maximizing the potential benefits and addressing the challenges of a multigenerational team.

Strategies for managing age diversity

The literature on strategies for managing age diversity in the workplace, as explored by Wang and Fang (2020) and Ali and French (2019), provides important insights into practices that can enhance organisational outcomes in age-diverse settings. Wang and Fang (2020) introduce the APPET framework,¹ which includes age-inclusive management, peer mentoring, participative decision-making, job security, and training to counter age-related stereotypes. This framework is notably comprehensive, addressing multiple dimensions of age diversity management, from fostering inclusion to implementing training programs designed to reduce biases. A key strength of this approach lies in its holistic nature, which facilitates knowledge sharing and improves job performance across different age groups. However, implementing such a framework may pose challenges for organisations with limited resources, as its effectiveness hinges on consistent and strategic application. While Ali and French (2019) emphasize the importance of aligning age diversity practices with organisational outcomes through the lenses of social exchange theory and contingency theory. They argue that the success of age diversity management depends on an organisation's diversity perspective whether it merely prioritises fairness and anti-discrimination or actively values individual differences to create synergy. The strength of this study is its empirical support for the notion that organisations adopting a synergy perspective are more likely to achieve positive outcomes from their age diversity initiatives.

While Wang and Fang's work concentrates on specific actionable practices for managing age diversity, Ali and French offer a broader theoretical framework that elucidates the conditions under which these practices are most likely to succeed. Collectively, these studies highlight the critical importance of strategically managing age diversity, suggesting that organisations must balance practical measures and interventions with a comprehensive understanding of the theoretical context to fully leverage the advantages of an age-diverse workforce. For police officers, these insights indicate that well-managed age diversity can lead to improved team performance and cohesion, provided that the specific challenges are addressed thoughtfully. Transitioning to the subsequent theme concerning the wellbeing of police officers, it is essential to recognise that the management of age diversity not only influences organisational outcomes but also significantly impacts occupational stress and mental health among police officers.

Wellbeing of police officers

The demanding nature of policing makes officer wellbeing a critical issue, encompassing occupational stress and mental health. Occupational stress, stemming from job demands, directly impacts mental health, often leading to anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Beckley et al., 2023; Demou et al., 2020). The focus of this section explores how stress affects

officers' mental health and cognitive functioning, underscoring the need for effective support strategies.

Occupational stress and its impact on wellbeing

Research by Acquadro Maran et al. (2015) and Gutshall et al. (2017) highlights the psychological and physical toll of occupational stress. Acquadro Maran et al. (2015) examine stress manifestations across gender, roles, and sectors, emphasizing anxiety and coping strategies. Their study provides tailored training recommendations but is limited by self-reported data and regional focus (Northern Italy). Complementing this, Gutshall et al. (2017) investigate the cognitive effects of stress, linking it to impaired decision-making and increased susceptibility to PTSD and depression. Their broader perspective on cognitive decline is valuable, though limited by a lack of longitudinal data. Both studies underscore the need for comprehensive stress management programs addressing both immediate and long-term psychological effects, all of which is important for serving police officers.

Mental health challenges among police officers

Jetelina et al. (2020) and Syed et al. (2020) examine the mental health challenges in policing. Jetelina et al. (2020) identify high rates of PTSD, depression, and anxiety, alongside barriers to seeking help, such as stigma and confidentiality concerns. Their mixed-method approach strengthens the study but limits generalisability due to its single-department focus. Syed et al. (2020) take a global perspective, analysing how occupational stressors, including exposure to violence and long shifts, contribute to mental health issues. Their meta-analysis offers a broad understanding but lacks in-depth cultural and organisational analysis. What such evidence highlights is the urgent need for targeted mental health interventions that address police-specific stressors and barriers to care.

The research into the wellbeing of police officers underscores the significant impact of occupational stress on police mental health, particularly regarding anxiety, depression, PTSD, and cognitive decline (see: Birch et al. 2017; Beckley et al. 2023). Addressing both immediate and long-term effects through stress management and mental health support is crucial. Additionally, understanding barriers to seeking help in both national and global contexts is essential, particularly as these challenges may intensify with an ageing workforce in policing.

Ageing workforce in policing (and related professions)

As the workforce in high-stress professions such as policing, military service and helicopter emergency medical services continues to age, individuals within these fields encounter distinct challenges that significantly affect their physical and cognitive capabilities. These professions are characterised by intense demands that require sustained physical endurance, sharp cognitive functioning, and a high degree of resilience. As personnel age, the natural decline in these areas poses critical concerns not only for the individuals themselves but also for the overall effectiveness and safety of their teams (Bullock et al., 2018, Gershon 2002; Carney et al., 2019). The following scientific evidence

considers the ageing process and how it is experienced in high-pressure environments, offering a comparative analysis of how these challenges are addressed across policing and related professions.

Experiences of an ageing workforce in policing

The work of Carney et al. (2019), Bullock et al. (2018), and Gershon et al. (2002) collectively offer valuable insights into the unique challenges encountered by an ageing workforce in policing, particularly concerning the profession's physical, cognitive, and psychosocial demands. Carney et al. (2019) focus on the impact of retirement on police officers' wellbeing, revealing that many officers experience a significant decline in mental health due to the loss of identity and purpose that often accompanies retirement. The strength of this study lies in its attention to the transition phase, an aspect frequently overlooked in discussions on ageing in policing. However, the reliance on qualitative data from a relatively small sample limits the generalisability of the findings. Bullock et al. (2018) address the challenges of maintaining physical fitness as police officers age, noting that the physical demands of the job, coupled with age-related declines in strength and endurance, can lead to increased injury rates and diminished job performance. This study's strength lies in its thorough assessment of physical health across different age groups within the police force. However, its primary focus on male officers leaves a gap in understanding how ageing affects female officers. Gershon et al. (2002) broaden the discussion by analysing the impact of work-related stress on the health of ageing police officers. They identify maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as alcohol abuse and aggression, as significant risk factors for older officers, linking these behaviours to adverse health outcomes like chronic back pain, anxiety, and burnout. The detailed examination of how stress accumulates and manifests in physical and psychological health problems over time is a notable strength of this research. Nevertheless, the study's cross-sectional design limits its ability to establish causality, and its focus on a single urban police department may reduce the applicability of its findings to other regions.

While Carney et al. concentrate on the post-retirement phase, Bullock et al. and Gershon et al. focus on the active service period, highlighting ongoing struggles with physical fitness and stress management. Collectively, these studies underscore the critical need for tailored interventions that address the specific challenges faced by an ageing police workforce, including enhanced physical fitness programs, mental health support, and stress management strategies.

Experiences of an ageing workforce in related professions

In regard to related professions to policing, Williamson et al. (2019) and Bauer et al. (2020) provide valuable insights into the unique challenges faced by an ageing workforce in high-stress professions, such as military service and other emergency services. Williamson et al. (2019) investigate the long-term impact of military service on the physical health of geriatric UK veterans, revealing that while the rigorous physical training typical of military service often contributes to good physical health later in life, it also predisposes veterans to chronic health issues, including hearing loss and musculoskeletal problems. A notable strength of this study is its comprehensive qualitative approach, which offers a profound understanding of veterans' lived experiences.

However, the study's exclusive focus on physical health may neglect other critical aspects of wellbeing, such as mental health and social integration post-service.

In contrast, Bauer et al. (2020) examine the impact of ageing on HEMS pilots, emphasizing the cognitive and physical demands inherent to the profession. The study identifies that as pilots age, they experience challenges such as slower reaction times and diminished physical endurance, which can compromise safety in high-stakes emergency scenarios. The strength of this research lies in its focus on a critical yet often overlooked profession, providing practical recommendations for managing an ageing workforce in HEMS, including regular cognitive and physical assessments. However, similar to Williamson et al., this study's narrow focus may be a limitation, as it does not fully address the psychological stressors associated with ageing in such a high-pressure role.

What such evidence reveals is that ageing presents significant challenges across policing, military service, and other emergency services, though these challenges manifest differently depending on the profession. In policing, the ageing workforce struggles with maintaining physical fitness, managing work-related stress, and facing mental health declines, particularly post-retirement. These challenges are compounded by the physically demanding and high-stress nature of the job, as highlighted by studies such as those by Carney et al. (2019) and Bullock et al. (2018). Similarly, military service and emergency services also demand high levels of physical and cognitive endurance, with ageing professionals in these fields facing slower reaction times, decreased endurance, and chronic health issues, as noted by Williamson et al. (2019) and Bauer et al. (2020). Comparing these professions, it is evident that tailored interventions are essential to support ageing workers. These include enhanced physical fitness programs, regular health assessments, mental health support, and strategies for managing stress. By applying these lessons across policing, and other related professions, organisations can better support the health, performance, and retention of their ageing workforce, ensuring that these professionals remain effective and safe in their roles as they advance in age.

Concluding the introduction

In conclusion, it can be noted that the literature underscores the significant impact of ageing on police officers, highlighting the complex interplay of physical, cognitive, and psychological changes that can challenge their ability to perform effectively. Ageing police officers face unique challenges, including declines in physical fitness, cognitive sharpness and increased vulnerability to mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, and depression. These challenges are exacerbated by the demanding nature of police work, where maintaining physical endurance, quick decision-making abilities, and emotional resilience are essential.

The research highlights the need for targeted interventions within police forces to address these age-related challenges. Tailored physical fitness programs, regular health assessments, and comprehensive mental health support are essential to help older officers maintain their performance and safety. Furthermore, more research is needed to explore the psychological and social aspects of ageing in policing, as these areas are currently

underrepresented in the literature. Future directions should focus on developing strategies that account for the specific demands of policing and the unique needs of an ageing workforce. By doing so, police organisations such as the NSWPF can ensure that ageing officers continue to contribute effectively while safeguarding their health and wellbeing, ultimately enhancing the overall strength and resilience of the police force.

Methodology

This preliminary study sought to explore the experiences of police officers aged 50 and above in the New South Wales Police Force (NSWPF) regarding the ageing process in policing. It seeks to identify factors, both individual and organisational, that either enhance or hinder the engagement and effectiveness of older officers in the workplace. The study addresses the following questions:

Q1: What are the experiences and perceptions of officers aged 50+ regarding ageing in NSWPF?

Q2: How do individual and organisational characteristics support or hinder older officers?

Q3: In what ways do officers aged 50+ perceive the effects of ageing on job performance, safety and wellbeing?

Q4: What innovative policies can effectively manage and leverage the skills of an ageing workforce?

Q5: How can the identified characteristics contribute to evidence-based strategies for enhancing the engagement and productivity of ageing police officers, benefiting both individuals and the organisation?

Methods

The data collection process for this study began with first level of sampling, as outlined by Clark et al. (2021), where the case is identified – that being police officers aged 50+ in the NSWPF. Purposive sampling was employed in the study as it allowed for the selection of information-rich ‘units’ with the right kind of life experience, often experts in their field (Clark et al., 2021, p. 1185).

To start the recruitment process, the study was endorsed by the NSWPF, and an advert was posted on the NSW Police internal communications system, inviting officers aged 50 and above who were willing to share their experiences to respond. In response to this, 230 officers responded, however a screening exercise took place that removed 17 participants who did not meet the eligibility criteria.

Following this, second level of sampling was conducted whereby the ‘sample units’ (participants) were selected, a process outlined by Clark et al. (2021), p. 1183). To achieve this, stratified purposive sampling was undertaken to divide

Table 1. Sample ($n = 36$).

Code	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Rank	Metro/Regional/Rural
PO1M	Male	55	Anglo-Saxon	Sergeant	Rural
PO2M	Male	51	Anglo-Saxon	Sergeant	Metro
PO3M	Male	56	Anglo-Saxon	Senior Sergeant	Metro
PO4M	Male	56	Anglo-Saxon	Chief Inspector	Metro
PO5M	Male	50	Anglo-Saxon	Sergeant	Rural
PO6M	Male	54	Anglo-Saxon	Sergeant	Rural
PO7M	Male	52	Anglo-Saxon	Inspector	Regional
PO8M	Male	51	Anglo-Saxon	Sergeant	Regional
PO9M	Male	57	Anglo-Saxon	Detective Sergeant	Metro
PO10M	Male	56	Anglo-Saxon	Senior Sergeant	Regional
PO11M	Male	60	Anglo-Saxon	Detective Senior Constable	Metro
PO12M	Male	57	Anglo-Saxon	Detective Chief Superintendent	Metro
PO13M	Male	51	Anglo-Saxon Southern-European	Sergeant	Regional
PO14M	Male	50	Anglo-Saxon	Inspector	Metro
PO15M	Male	55	Central European/Irish	Detective Senior Constable	Metro
PO16M	Male	56	Anglo-Saxon	Detective Senior Constable	Regional
PO17M	Male	52	Anglo-Saxon	Detective Sergeant	Metro
PO18M	Male	63	Anglo-Saxon	Chief Inspector	Metro
PO19M	Male	52	Anglo-Saxon	Sergeant	Regional
PO1F	Female	58	Anglo-Saxon	Superintendent	Metro
PO2F	Female	53	Anglo-Saxon	Chief Inspector	Metro
PO3F	Female	50	Anglo-Saxon	Sergeant	Regional
PO4F	Female	59	Anglo-Saxon	Senior Constable	Metro
PO5F	Female	52	Anglo-Saxon	Sergeant	Regional
PO6F	Female	54	Anglo-Saxon	Detective Inspector	Metro
PO7F	Female	51	Anglo-Saxon	Detective Sergeant	Metro
PO8F	Female	50	Anglo-Saxon	Sergeant	Metro
PO9F	Female	51	North Asian	Sergeant	Metro
PO10F	Female	57	Anglo-Saxon	Senior Constable	Metro
PO11F	Female	51	Anglo-Saxon	Inspector	Metro
PO12F	Female	58	Anglo-Saxon	Sergeant	Metro
PO13F	Female	57	Anglo-Saxon Southern-European	Detective Senior Constable	Metro
PO14F	Female	52	Anglo-Saxon	Sergeant	Regional
PO15F	Female	63	Anglo Saxon South American	Senior Constable	Metro
PO16F	Female	57	Anglo-Saxon	Senior Sergeant	Metro
PO17F	Female	50	Aboriginal	Senior Constable	Regional

the existing sample into different sub-groups called ‘strata’, ensuring variety in the sample, which is important as it improves validity and uncovers variability (Clark et al., 2021, p. 1185). These sub-groups were based on the differences between the groups reflecting gender (male/female), location (rural/remote) and whether they were operational or not. Subsequently, participants were randomly selected from these strata, reducing the sample size from $n = 213$ to $n = 36$. This sample size of 36 is important, as Mason (2010) and Morse (2000) both suggest that 30–40 interviews are sufficient to reach saturation, where every category is well-established and validated, and any additional interviews may reduce the quality of the study.

The participants of this study, aged 50 and above, were selected to align with the study’s focus on the ageing process in the police and to ensure a diverse range of experiences through different ranks and locations were captured. Please see Table 1 for details of the final sample, as well as the codes assigned to participants to ensure anonymity.

Data collection tool and approach to analysis

Semi-structured interviews were selected for this study as they offer flexibility and capture the interviewee's point-of-view, showing how they think and feel about a topic (Clark et al., 2021), in this instance ageing in policing. To minimise bias, the principal researcher, a former practitioner in the field of criminal and community justice, did not conduct interviews or initial coding; instead, five research assistants with no practice background conducted the interviews and preliminary analysis, helping to ensure analytic distance and objectivity. The study adopted a thematic analysis as it is a useful research tool that is particularly effective for identifying, analysing, and reporting themes within datasets, which are repeated patterns that have some level of meaning within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke's general method involves a systematic six-stage process: familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally the write up (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clark et al., 2021). To ensure inter-rater reliability in the thematic analysis, initial coding and theme development were undertaken independently by the five research assistants. The primary researcher then reviewed the coded data in conjunction with the original interview transcripts to verify consistency, accuracy, and thematic coherence. Using this framework, themes in the study were generated inductively, meaning they were strongly linked to the data itself rather than shaped by pre-existing frameworks or analytic preconceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Although the thematic analysis in this study was conducted inductively, the interpretation of findings was informed by concepts from the theory of successful ageing, particularly within occupational contexts (see Bowling & Iliffe, 2011). This framework emphasizes the capacity of individuals to adapt to age-related changes through processes of optimisation, compensation, and selective engagement in meaningful roles. In the context of policing, this lens enabled a nuanced understanding of how older officers navigate physical decline, role transitions, and identity shifts – while also contributing to organisational stability and mentoring. Incorporating this theoretical perspective ensured that the analysis captured not only challenges, but also adaptive strengths and opportunities related to ageing within the police profession.

Ethical considerations

The study received ethics approval from both the UTS Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) and the NSWPF, ensuring that it meets institutional and professional ethical standards (Ethics number: ETH24–9116).

Analysis of findings

The data presented reflects three central themes that emerged from the analysis, beginning with the demographics of the cohort interviewed (theme 1), followed by theme 2 - experiencing of ageing in the police force, which examines how ageing impacts job performance and mental health, with particular emphasis on the cumulative effects of trauma and occupational injuries; as well as exploration of the interplay between the enhanced skills that come with experience and the physical limitations that may hinder certain operational duties. While the final theme, theme 3 – future outlook and recommendations, capturing officers' perspectives on retirement planning, career transitions, and proposed strategies to improve institutional support for ageing members of the force.

Theme 1: demographic information

The study sample comprised 36 participants, with 19 males (52.8%) and 17 females (47.2%). Participants' ages ranged from 50 to 63 years, with a mean age of 55.3 years. Most participants identified as Anglo-Saxon ($n = 33$, 91.6%), including smaller groups who identified as both Anglo-Saxon and e.g., Southern-European ($n = 3$), while other sample members identified as Central European/Irish ($n = 1$, 2.8%), North Asian ($n = 1$, 2.8%) and Aboriginal ($n = 1$, 2.8%).

Participants held a range of ranks, with Sergeants being the largest group ($n = 14$, 38.8%), followed by Senior Constables ($n = 4$, 11.1%), Detective Senior Constables ($n = 4$, 11.1%), Senior Sergeants ($n = 3$, 8.3%), Chief Inspectors ($n = 3$, 8.3%), Inspectors ($n = 3$, 8.3%), Detective Sergeants ($n = 3$, 8.3%), and higher-ranking officers including a Superintendent ($n = 1$, 2.8%) and a Detective Chief Superintendent ($n = 1$, 2.8%).

Geographically, the sample included officers from metro areas ($n = 23$, 63.9%), regional areas ($n = 10$, 27.8%), and rural areas ($n = 3$, 8.3%). Overall, the sample represented a diverse cross-section of experienced officers in terms of rank and geographic distribution, with a slight predominance of male participants and a largely Anglo-Saxon ethnic composition.

Theme 2: experience of ageing in the police force

Changes in the role over time. The ageing process brings inevitable physical, psychological, and emotional challenges for officers, compounded by the evolving demands of their roles.

Physical Wellbeing

A consistent theme among the sample population is the gradual decline in physical capability despite efforts to maintain health and fitness. As PO12F states, 'With age you're not as fit as you used to be, but I go to the gym every day and eat relatively healthy.' Similarly, PO10M acknowledges, 'I'm not as strong and agile as I was in my 20s and 30s.' These reflections align with broader research on the impacts of ageing, with officers facing a natural reduction in physical performance.

Despite transitioning to office-based roles, many officers remain operationally deployable, which creates additional physical strain. As PO10F shares, 'We still get asked to go out on the street... it's a lot more tiring.' This expectation to perform at the same level as younger officers, without consideration for age, creates fatigue and potential injury risks.

A recurring concern is the physical toll of wearing standard police gear. PO9F mentions, 'When you're operational, you're on the road more. Wearing the gun belt, boots, and full uniform – it's an extra 10 kilos on you.' For female officers, this is compounded by experiences such as menopause, further intensifying discomfort.

The reality of injuries and slower recovery times emerges as a consistent challenge. PO7F describes, 'I had an injury in February with a ripped ligament, and I'm still not back on the road,' while PO5F adds, 'Now I'm finding it harder physically because I'm carrying an injury.' These testimonies illustrate how ageing both increases the likelihood of injury and extends recovery periods.

Several participants reflect on how their physically demanding early careers led to lasting health issues. PO16F recounts, 'Eight years in uniform at Kings Cross, very operational... physical work, fighting, wrestling... I've had lower back, upper back,

neck injuries,’ leading to restricted duties after decades of full operational work. PO16M reveals, ‘Now that I’m 56, I’ve inherited Type 2 diabetes, put on weight, and slowed down. . . through sport and life, I’ve obtained knee and back injuries.’ This intersection of chronic conditions and accumulated injuries highlights how policing intensifies the physical burdens of ageing.

A stark observation comes from PO7M, who references Dr Gilmartin, a US behavioural scientist who noted that: ‘The average lifespan for police who make it to retirement is 18 years less than the rest of the population.’ This statistic underscores the long-term physical toll of policing and suggests that officers’ wellbeing needs more proactive support.

Psychological and emotional wellbeing. Alongside physical challenges, the sample population reports increasing psychological and emotional stress with age. Heavier workloads, greater administrative responsibilities, and constant exposure to trauma exacerbate this stress.

PO11F notes, ‘When you go hands-on, you’re probably gonna get more injured than a younger person.’ The anticipation of injury and slower recovery times adds a layer of anxiety to operational duties, with older officers aware of their vulnerabilities.

PO6M elaborates on the compounding effects of ageing and the emotional strain of police work: ‘Policing is a young man’s game. . . the physical aspect is still a real component. Now, it’s the furthest thing from my mind.’ His reflection suggests that the job’s physical and psychological demands become increasingly difficult to reconcile as officers age.

Value as an older officer. Despite the physical decline, older officers often bring invaluable experience, judgment, and leadership to the force. The sample highlights how older officers serve as mentors and provide stability within teams.

PO8F explains, ‘I’ve gone into more of a back-office role instead of being on the frontline, just because chasing after people. . . it’s a bit harder when you get older.’ While this transition may limit their operational capacity, it enables older officers to contribute to advisory and administrative roles.

PO10M supports this, ‘I have moved into a supervisory role. . . supporting younger officers and managing operations, which suits me better at this stage.’ This redistribution of duties acknowledges the strengths older officers offer while reducing the physical strain of frontline work.

Influence in the force. As officers age, they often gain significant influence within the force, shaping policy, mentoring junior staff, and advocating for healthier work environments. PO16F reflects, ‘I use my experience to guide younger officers. . . helping them avoid the mistakes I made.’ This transfer of knowledge helps maintain institutional memory and fosters a supportive team environment. However, this influence is not without its challenges. Some officers report feeling overlooked or undervalued as they near retirement. PO17F notes, ‘Sometimes you feel like you’re being put out to pasture, even though you still have a lot to offer.’ Addressing this perception is critical for ensuring older officers remain engaged and respected.

Interpersonal dynamics. The ageing process also impacts interpersonal dynamics within police teams. Older officers often describe a shift in their role from peer to mentor, with both positive and negative implications. PO9F shares, 'You become the person people go to for advice... but sometimes you miss just being "one of the team."' This evolving dynamic can create feelings of isolation, as older officers may feel distanced from the camaraderie of their younger colleagues.

Impact on community and offender relations. Finally, the sample population highlights how ageing officers often experience a shift in their approach to community and offender interactions. PO11F explains, 'I think with age comes a bit more patience and perspective... I handle situations differently now than I did in my 20s.' This maturity often leads to more effective conflict resolution and community engagement.

However, some officers report that their physical decline occasionally undermines their authority in confrontational situations. PO6M acknowledges, 'There are times when you know you're not as intimidating as you used to be, and offenders pick up on that.' Balancing this with the wisdom and communication skills that come with experience is a key aspect of ageing in policing.

Positive impacts on community and offender relations. Participants consistently attributed positive impacts on community and offender relations to life experience and long service. PO9M observed that older officers' presence reassures civilians: 'They see how old you are, and they probably think, oh, he's been in the police a long time. He probably knows what he's doing.' Similarly, PO8F noted that in domestic violence incidents, being an older female officer may foster a sense of safety and trust compared to a younger male counterpart.

Several officers highlighted that older police are more likely to de-escalate situations through communication. PO9F commented that 'they're more likely to listen and de-escalate things,' while PO8F mentioned that offenders are less likely to attempt deception with older officers, recognising their experience. PO6F added, 'It's very difficult as a young person to walk into a domestic and tell people what to do,' reinforcing the perceived authority and confidence that comes with age.

The ability to remain calm and patient was a recurring theme. PO6M noted that his experience enables him to 'remain calm' and adopt a more 'considered and diplomatic approach,' which fosters respect and trust with both offenders and the community. With older officers were being seen as more likely to resolve complex situations, such as domestic disputes, with alternative solutions. PO4F explained that victims and offenders tend to gravitate towards older officers, perceiving them as the authority figure, which can lead to more successful and positive resolutions.

Negative impacts on community and offender relations. Negative impacts were less frequent but centred on physical limitations affecting offender relations. PO8F admitted that offenders might attempt to escape, thinking an older female officer couldn't catch them: 'It was an old female chick, I'm going to run because she ain't going to catch me.' PO9F and PO3F acknowledged that older officers are less likely to engage in pursuits or physical confrontations, recognising their slower speed and risk of injury.

Physical concerns also impacted decision-making, with PO5F revealing she hesitates to engage physically out of fear of re-injury: 'I'm more than happy to send the younger ones in.' This hesitation could allow offenders to evade arrest, presenting a significant challenge for ageing officers.

PO6M recounted a situation where a younger, more physically imposing offender disregarded his commands, forcing him to draw his taser to gain compliance, emphasizing that some offenders perceive older officers as easier targets. Additionally, PO17M noted public criticism based on physical appearance, stating: 'You [hear] criticism from the public saying "Oh my God, look how fat or old that officer is,"' highlighting how stereotypes about ageing officers can undermine their perceived capability.

Overall, while older officers are valued for their communication skills, de-escalation abilities, and perceived authority, physical limitations and stereotypes present ongoing challenges in offender management.

Theme 3: future outlook and suggestions

Future outlook and retirement. Many participants expressed a desire to remain in the police force until retirement, primarily due to financial considerations, concerns about alternative career options at their age, and existing retirement incentives. However, some expressed doubts about their ability to continue due to the physical and psychological demands of the job.

Likelihood of remaining until retirement. Several participants acknowledged their intention to stay until retirement, though some expressed uncertainty. PO8F remarked, 'Some weeks I'd say hell no,' while PO9F stated, 'I don't think I'll be, I can do the role until my retirement.' These statements highlight the struggle between career commitment and the challenges of sustaining the role long-term. PO18M, who enjoys his job, emphasized the importance of workplace relationships and job satisfaction: 'I enjoy my job. I have good colleagues. I find it challenging and it's something that I can do and ... contribute.' Similarly, PO5M noted, 'I love this job ... It's one of the few jobs where you're surrounded by people who at least have a similar personality ...'

Conversely, some participants felt the job's demands would push them to leave. PO17F stated, 'If I found something that paid me the same, that took a lot of the stress off me and was not so physically demanding or psychologically demanding, I'd leave tomorrow.' PO19M echoed these concerns, stating, 'I don't think I'll make it through to retirement ... The job used to be really simple. It's becoming more and more complicated.' He highlighted increasing societal expectations of police, particularly regarding mental health: 'Society is asking more and more ... we just don't have the tools in the toolbox ... Mental health is certainly one of those areas where the health system should be the primary agency, yet it seems like the police are always dealing with it.'

Factors influencing retirement decisions. A common motivation for staying was financial security, particularly for those eligible for pension benefits. PO9M stated, 'because I'm pre-88 but,' indicating guaranteed pension security. In contrast, PO11F, who is not eligible for the same scheme, emphasized, 'I'm definitely not staying for the money,' and added, 'There's no incentive to stay on.'

Physical health concerns also played a role. PO10F noted, ‘Oh, maybe the health might be . . . , you know, feel that you know, can’t manage it.’ PO11F reinforced this concern, explaining that operational anxieties increase with age: ‘The more anxious people get about being operational and being on the road because if you get injured, you know that you’re not, you’re not looked after.’

Increased workload and stress also contributed to early retirement considerations. PO9M stated, ‘I never really thought about getting out for the last say couple of years. I’m starting to think it’s getting towards the end as it is. The work is pretty intensive.’ PO8F expressed uncertainty: ‘The grass isn’t always greener. Am I better to stay and just ride it out or try my hand at something different?’

Many who planned to remain cited job fulfilment as a key motivator. PO13F stated, ‘I absolutely love my job, and where I work is pretty good at the moment. . . I’m looking forward to coming into work.’ PO15F echoed this sentiment: ‘I love the job. I absolutely love it.’ PO12M highlighted his passion for the profession: ‘We make people safer, and I have great plans, so I’m happy with where I’m heading.’ PO11M viewed retirement as a milestone rather than an escape, saying, ‘I’m only gonna retire because you know it’s-it’s a milestone 40 years and I still wanna be fit enough to travel around with the [partner] and do all that sort of stuff.’

A recurring concern was the lack of structures supporting ageing officers. PO10M noted, ‘Not many people are staying in that long, so I don’t think the police caters for adequately people like myself that might, you know, still think they’ve got another five or ten years in the police.’ Limited part-time and transitional roles were seen as a major issue. PO8F stated, ‘There’s only so many of those kind of spots, you know . . . So that’s why I guess a lot of them leave. Because what other choice have they got?’ PO9F added, ‘I definitely would like a part-time role as a job-sharing position, but if it’s not available. . . I guess I don’t think I’ll be [staying].’

Suggestions for improvement. Participants offered various recommendations to improve workforce retention, increase incentives for long-serving officers, and enhance quality of life. Key suggestions included greater workplace flexibility, transitional roles for older officers, and improved work-life balance.

Improvements for ageing officer support. A significant theme was the need for greater recognition and support for ageing officers. PO6F emphasized, ‘We need to value our older people more. There’re people leaving this job with so much experience and [they] just walk out . . .’. Whilst the analysis identified gaps in the mental health support within the NSWPF, with many participants highlighting the need for stronger support systems. PO3F suggested a ‘stronger [welfare] network’ and ‘the impartiality of someone who understand how to improve a workplace’ but doesn’t work for the NSWPF. PO7M noted the need for better mental health policies, recalling a stigmatizing experience: ‘Management here took my gun and said you can’t go out,’ after requesting a routine checkup.

Support for officers’ physical wellbeing was also raised. PO17F recommended offering basic health screenings in the workplace: ‘Even basic things, you know, like getting your blood pressure and your cholesterol and your sugars checked in the workplace.’ This

reflects the need for proactive health measures, which could help ageing officers manage chronic conditions and stay in the job longer.

Flexible working arrangements. A significant number of participants advocated for more flexible working conditions, especially for older officers. PO3F proposed ‘part-time arrangements for senior police’ and ‘job sharing’ to alleviate the physical and emotional strain. PO19M suggested creating ancillary roles to allow older officers to contribute without the physical demands of frontline work: ‘Perhaps there should be a range of ancillary jobs ... that allow them to continue.’ PO16M agreed, advocating for roles that do not involve night shifts or physically demanding tasks: ‘Effective roles that they can play as older police ... not on the front-line doing night shifts.’ PO17M expressed concerns about the impact of shift work, noting the challenges of 12-hour night shifts: ‘A lot in the mainstream, you know, frontline policing ... they do a lot of 12-hour night shifts ... I’ve seen quite a few older guys really struggling.’ Several officers suggested more flexible shift patterns, such as restricting older officers to day shifts. PO5F proposed non-operational desk roles that are less physically demanding: ‘Make it so old officers ... don’t have to do the night shift anymore.’

The challenges posed by shift work were further emphasized by PO8M, who highlighted the health risks associated with night shifts, such as sleep deprivation, PTSD, and cancer: ‘Night shifts ... sleep deprivation and certain cancers run hand in hand.’ PO4M echoed this concern, suggesting that roster management should account for family responsibilities and physical capacities, though acknowledging the organisational challenges in doing so: ‘Allowing more options for the pattern of work ... most managers and commanders are concerned about their staff but also have obligations about services they deliver.’ These statements reflect the mismatch between general duties work and the needs of older officers, given the physical demands and organisational constraints.

Finally, PO7F shared concerns about the transition to 12-hour shifts, noting the negative impact on social interaction and teamwork: ‘When we went from 8 hours shifts to 12-hour shifts, we lost ... social interaction.’ This shift exacerbated work-life balance issues, further highlighting the strain on older officers in general duties.

Discussion, recommendations and future directions

This research has aimed to reveal the experiences and perceptions of ageing officers within the NSWPF regarding job performance, safety, and wellbeing. Additionally, the article has sought to identify individual and organisational support mechanisms to assess their effectiveness and consider how the data presented can inform evidence-based practices for supporting ageing police officers globally. To interpret these findings, the analysis was guided by principles of successful ageing theory (see Bowling & Iliffe, 2011), which emphasize how individuals adapt to age-related changes through optimisation, compensation, and continued engagement in meaningful roles. This lens is particularly relevant to high-risk professions such as policing, where maintaining performance and wellbeing requires not only institutional support but also personal resilience and role adaptation. The following discussion reflects on the key findings through this conceptual lens and provides a series of recommendations yielded from the empirical work.

Experiences of ageing police officers

The experiences and perceptions of police officers aged 50+ within the NSWPF is evidenced through several subthemes throughout the study such as: the value of older officers, the influence officers have on younger colleagues, and changes to physical health. The findings and analysis of this study reveal that some officers do not feel valued for their service by the organisation. This perception aligns with the findings of Wainwright et al. (2019) in their UK-based study, which highlights a common assumption that the capability and motivation of employees to engage in work diminishes as one ages. Consequently, workplace accommodations, including greater employment flexibility, have been identified as necessary policy recommendations (Wainwright et al., 2019). Building on this, Keeble-Ramsay (2018) emphasizes the strong and significant benefits of retaining older employees in the workforce, reflecting the value such employees have on an organisation. These benefits include cost reductions, increased productivity for businesses, and enhanced pension sustainability. Despite these identified advantages, the lack of concrete action to plan and manage the long-term inclusion of older employees in the workforce reflects broader challenges. This inaction contributes to a perception of undervaluing, which may mirror the experiences of officers who feel similarly unrecognised for their contributions within their organisations. However, amongst many interviewed there was a sense of value within their specific commands/units/teams. Officers shared evidence suggesting they are appreciated for their experience and knowledge, particularly by younger colleagues. Male interviewees specifically noted that their seniority within their team positioned them as highly valued members, often viewed by younger colleagues as parental role models or experienced team members who could provide guidance and support. These findings are consistent with the observations Cox and Marvell (2017), who highlight that older individuals in the workplace place significant value on social interaction and teamwork. This underscores the notion that older officers gain a strong sense of value and confidence from the recognition and appreciation of their experience and insights by younger colleagues (Cox & Marvell, 2017). However, to ensure supportive, inclusive, and respectful workplace environments, it is crucial to implement measures that effectively promote awareness of the ageing process, foster mutual understanding, and encourage respect. Such initiatives can help ensure that all employees, particularly older individuals, feel valued for their experience and knowledge.

Individual and organisational support mechanisms

A key aim of this study was to examine the individual and organisational characteristics surrounding ageing officers to identify mechanisms that either support or hinder their work. The data analysis revealed that, although support systems are available within the NSWPF, there is limited evidence to suggest these systems are actively beneficial to all officers. One prominent individual characteristic that officers identified as beneficial to their careers was the cumulative experience, confidence, and knowledge gained over time. These qualities enabled them to manage interactions with offenders and the community more effectively. Notably, many officers described a shift in their approach to policing as they aged, transitioning to a more empathetic and understanding perspective in the latter stages of their career. This shift reportedly improved their dealings with offenders and community members, making their work

less stressful and more fulfilling. Participants also highlighted the respect and authority that older officers can yield from among junior colleagues, attributing this to their extensive experience. This respect not only facilitated better outcomes in interactions with offenders and the community but also contributed significantly to older officers' job satisfaction. These findings align with prior literature, such as a study by Newman-Noon (2022), which examined the relationships between job satisfaction, personality traits, resilience, and education levels among 150 sworn rural police officers in the United States. Newman-Noon found that job satisfaction is influenced by various factors, including personality traits and the quality of relationships with civilians. Similarly, this study supports the notion that positive and successful interactions between police, offenders, and the community improve with age and experience. These interactions, in turn, enhance job satisfaction and engagement at work for ageing officers.

This study has also highlighted organisational characteristics that can hinder older officers within the police force. A predominant concern raised by participants was the perceived lack of support from the organisation for its ageing workforce. Some officers expressed frustration over the absence of policies/initiatives designed to promote career longevity for older personnel. One significant perspective was shared by a rural officer, who described feeling labelled as 'dead weight' due to his long-standing role in general duties rather than pursuing promotional opportunities. This perception left the officer feeling disengaged and unsupported, interpreting it as an implicit organisational effort to reduce the presence of ageing officers and encourage retirement. Similar sentiments were echoed by other participants, who noted that a lack of support for extending careers within the NSWPF hindered otherwise capable officers from remaining engaged and productive. These findings build on existing literature that emphasizes the global neglect of engagement strategies for ageing employees. For example, a European study by Gkiontsi and Karanika-Murray (2016) highlights the value older employees bring to the workforce, with this study advocating for initiatives such as additional training, increased recognition, and flexible work strategies to retain and empower older workers.

The effects of ageing on job performance, safety, and wellbeing

The physical effects of ageing have been found, in this study, to significantly impact police officers' job performance. Shift work and general duties, particularly demanding roles, were seen as more suitable for younger officers (18–30). Older officers reported fatigue and stress as barriers to maintaining health and work–life balance. Age-related physical decline also raised safety concerns, with tasks like making arrests becoming more difficult. A female officer noted that ageing hindered her ability to perform such tasks effectively, raising risks for officers and the public. While direct research on ageing and job performance is arguably limited, studies highlight the benefits of retaining older officers for their expertise and workforce stability (Wainwright et al., 2019). Strategies such as transitioning older officers to alternative roles or reduced-hour contracts can mitigate physical challenges while preserving their contributions. McMullin and Shuey (2006) further emphasized the importance of workplace accommodations, including role adjustments and flexible scheduling, yet little progress has been made in implementing these measures over time. Supporting ageing officers through such initiatives can enhance safety, wellbeing, and workforce retention.

The physical impact of ageing is particularly pronounced for female officers. One interviewee noted a decline in physical readiness after 40, aligning with a Serbian study that found older female officers had increased body fat percentages, negatively affecting their health, performance, and safety (Kukić et al., 2022). These findings reinforce the challenges ageing female officers face in physically demanding roles such as general duties and operational work. An area of policing, that of ageing female police officers, which more research is needed.

Ageing also affects officer wellbeing, particularly mental health. Policing is associated with high occupational stress, which impacts psychological wellbeing globally. The Promoting Active Ageing study found that workplace stress negatively influenced sleep, eating habits, and work–life balance (Chitra & Karunanidhi, 2013). In this study, participants reported significant mental health challenges early in their careers due to exposure to trauma, consistent with Jackman et al. (2020), who found lower psychological wellbeing among operational officers. However, officers in non-operational roles showed no significant differences in wellbeing (Jackman et al., 2020). Over time, experience and improved support services contributed to better mental health outcomes. In contrast, Parnaby and Broll (2021) found that Canadian police retirees often experienced worsened trauma and health outcomes post-retirement, suggesting stress resurfaces later in life. Similarly, Chitra and Karunanidhi (2013) identified mental health decline as a key factor in early retirement. However, resilience training, particularly for female officers, was effective in reducing stress and promoting career longevity. Given these mixed findings, further research is needed to understand long-term mental health trends and the effectiveness of targeted interventions throughout and after policing careers.

Study implications and recommendations

This study highlights the importance of evidence-based strategies in addressing the unique needs of an ageing police force. As officers age, physical declines, evolving cognitive capacities, and fluctuating motivations underscore the necessity of a structured support framework. The findings of this study reveal several key implications for supporting an ageing police workforce, particularly in the areas of physical health, and broader organisational support. Based on these insights, a set of recommendations emerge from the empirical work that seek to enhance the workplace experience for ageing officers and improve long-term workforce sustainability. These recommendations are:

Health and Wellbeing Initiatives should focus on both physical and psychological support. Structured physical fitness and injury rehabilitation programs, including strength training, physiotherapy, and ergonomic police gear, can help mitigate the physical challenges of ageing officers. Flexible work adjustments, such as transitioning into roles that leverage their expertise in community engagement, intelligence analysis, or training, will reduce physical strain while ensuring continued contributions. Additionally, expanding access to psychological services, peer support programs, and stress management workshops will help address the cumulative effects of operational stress and trauma, promoting long-term mental wellbeing.

Workforce Planning and Role Adaptation must prioritise structured career transitions that allow older officers to move into non-frontline roles without stigma. Establishing mentorship programs will enable older officers to guide and support junior colleagues,

fostering intergenerational learning and preserving institutional knowledge. Further, ensuring that older officers feel valued through leadership training, policy advisory roles, and public recognition of their contributions will enhance morale and retention.

Community and Operational Adjustments should include modifications to tactical training, shifting the focus from physical engagement to de-escalation and advanced communication strategies. Ergonomic enhancements to standard police gear, such as lighter vests and belts, can help reduce physical strain on ageing officers. Addressing public perceptions of ageing officers through strategic communication campaigns will help highlight their strengths in experience, wisdom, and conflict resolution, combating stereotypes and reinforcing their ongoing contributions to policing.

Retirement Planning and Transition Support is essential to ensuring officers are well-prepared for life after policing. Providing career transition services, financial planning assistance, and alternative career pathways will facilitate smooth transitions for those considering early retirement. Moreover, refining retirement policies to account for the unique health risks and demands faced by ageing officers will contribute to a more sustainable and supportive exit strategy.

The findings, and subsequent recommendations, from this study underscore both the complex challenges and opportunities associated with an ageing police workforce. With the recommendations presented not only benefitting individual officers but also strengthen organisational capacity by retaining experienced personnel and fostering a more inclusive and supportive work environment.

Direction for future research

This study has provided valuable insights into the experiences of ageing police officers, particularly regarding mental health, job performance, and workplace safety. However, further research is needed to examine ageing in policing across diverse geographical locations, as environmental and social factors significantly shape officers' experiences in metropolitan versus rural settings. Understanding these variations can inform more inclusive workplace policies. While the impact of ageing on female officers, especially regarding menopause, remains underexplored. While further research is needed on the influence of rank and the ageing process in policing. Research should also focus on how physiological changes affect performance and wellbeing, alongside evaluating existing workplace support and resource accessibility. Addressing this gap can lead to improved policies and awareness tailored to female officers in emergency response roles. Additionally, further research is needed to examine how the knowledge and experience transfer of older officers occurs in practice, and how workforce planning can be designed to ensure such expertise is not lost through unnecessary attrition and/or early retirement. Finally, longitudinal studies are essential to track mental health changes throughout a policing career, assessing the effectiveness of support mechanisms over time. Expanding research with larger, more diverse samples will strengthen evidence-based policy recommendations, enhancing police practices globally to better support an ageing workforce. Ultimately, the significance of an ageing police force across the globe is of concern. The importance of both

understanding and addressing this issue is paramount, not only for police officers and policing organisations, but for public safety as a whole.

Note

1. APPET is the acronym for: Age-inclusive management, Peer mentoring, Participative decision-making, Ensuring job security, and Training to counter age-related stereotypes.

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