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Examining the physical health and psychological well-being of police officers working 12-hour shifts: Evidence from South African Police Services

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Abstract
This study investigates the impacts of 12-hour shifts on police officers' health and well-being in Johannesburg Central, South Africa. Despite widespread adoption of extended shifts, limited empirical research exists on how such schedules affect officers' well-being in the South African context, creating a critical knowledge gap to be addressed. It is a qualitative study that employs phenomenological research design to capture police officers lived experiences. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 operational officers who work working 12-hour shifts. The analysis focused on the physical strain, psychological stress, and lifestyle disruptions associated with extended work hours. The study applied the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model and Spillover Theory to understand how work demands and limited resources affect officers' experiences both on and off duty. Findings reveal that 12-hour shifts lead to fatigue, musculoskeletal pain, disrupted sleep, emotional exhaustion, and lifestyle challenges such as irregular meals and decreased physical activity. However, factors like individual resilience, proactive health management, and organizational support can buffer some negative effects. The study recommends implementing flexible shift scheduling, ergonomic support, wellness programs, lifestyle interventions, and continuous health monitoring. The conclusion emphasizes that these strategies are crucial to ensuring that policing demands do not compromise officers' physical and psychological health.

Keywords: Fatigue, police officers, physical health, psychological well-being, south African police service, 12-hour shifts.

Introduction

Shift work remains an integral feature of policing worldwide, driven by the need for continuous service delivery, crime prevention, and public safety. In a high-pressure urban environment, police officers are required to remain physically present, psychologically alert, and emotionally composed for extended periods, often under unpredictable and demanding conditions. Policing is a continuous service profession that operates beyond conventional working-hour norms (Violanti, 2014; Madia, 2022). Across the world, police organisations operate on a 24-hour basis, requiring officers to work irregular and extended shifts to maintain public safety, prevent crime, and respond to emergencies (Molokomme, 2024). Literature has long established that policing is a continuous service profession that operates beyond conventional working-hour norms (Violanti, 2014; Caruso, 2014). As a result, extended shift systems, particularly 12-hour shifts, have become a common feature of modern policing in both developed and developing countries. While these systems are often justified based on operational efficiency and continuity, growing international scholarship has raised concerns about their implications for officers' physical health and psychological well-being (Kaushik & Raj, 2024; Molokomme, 2024; Madia, 2022; Scholarios, Hesselgreaves & Pratt, 2017).

Globally, policing is recognised as one of the most physically and psychologically demanding occupations. Warren (2015) stressed that police officers are exposed to prolonged standing, sustained vigilance, irregular sleep cycles, emotionally charged encounters, and repeated exposure to traumatic events. When these occupational stressors are compounded by long working hours and shift work, the cumulative burden on the body and mind is intensified (Arthur, 2024). International studies conducted in the United States, Sweden, Australia, and parts of Asia have established associations between extended shifts and fatigue, musculoskeletal pain, sleep disorders, emotional exhaustion, irritability, impaired concentration, and reduced overall well-being (Caruso, 2014; Ramey, Downing & Franke, 2009; Garbarino et al., 2019; Varker et al., 2018; Lee, Seong, Park, Lim, Hong, Cho, & Kim, 2021).

From an occupational health perspective, James and Vila (2015) postulate that extended working hours disrupt circadian rhythms and recovery processes, thereby increasing the risk of chronic fatigue and sleep-related disorders. Similarly, Sørengaard, Olsen, Langvik and Saksvik-Lehouillier. (2021) assert that prolonged shift work among police officers contributes to cumulative physiological strain and elevated psychological stress. Madia (2022) has further opined that these health challenges may undermine decision-making, ethical judgment, and emotional regulation, core competencies required for effective policing. Despite this growing body of international evidence, research has also highlighted that the impact of extended shift work is not uniform. Individual differences related to age, physical fitness, years of service, coping strategies, and social support significantly shape how officers experience and respond to long working hours. Some officers demonstrate adaptation and resilience, while others experience cumulative physical exhaustion and psychological depletion (Violanti, 2014; Molokomme, 2024). Thus, this heterogeneity depicts the importance of context-sensitive and employee-centred research that moves beyond generalised assumptions.

Within the Global South, and particularly in countries characterised by high crime rates, resource constraints, and complex socio-economic challenges, the implications of extended shift work may be further amplified. Lennie, Sarah and Sutton (2020) stressed that policing in such environments often involves heightened exposure to violence, public hostility, and traumatic incidents, intensifying both physical and emotional labour. However, empirical research examining how extended shift systems operate within these contexts, and how officers experience them, remains limited, specifically in South Africa. Thus, it is within this broader international and occupational context that the present study is situated.

However, in this study, Johannesburg Central emerges as a particularly significant context for examining these issues. As one of the busiest and most demanding policing environments in South Africa, the area is characterised by high crime levels, dense population movement, frequent public disturbances, and repeated exposure to violent and traumatic incidents. Officers working extended shifts in such an environment often sustain prolonged physical endurance, emotional regulation, and psychological resilience under persistent pressure. Examining their experiences provides critical insight into how extended shift work intersects with urban policing realities (Nkosi, 2019).

In this context, the South African Police Service (SAPS) has increasingly adopted 12-hour shift systems as part of its operational strategy. While these arrangements are intended to enhance service delivery, questions remain regarding their sustainability and their effects on police officers' health and well-being. Importantly, South African labour legislation, particularly the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA), emphasises humane working hours, adequate rest, and fair labour practices (Republic of South Africa, 1997). du Toit and Sirkhotte (2019) stress that, although policing is a unique occupation with operational exemptions, the spirit of labour and occupational safety legislation remains central to protecting employee dignity, health, and safety.

Although international scholarship has established that extended shift work may adversely affect police officers' physical health and psychological well-being, there remains a notable lack of context-specific, officer-centred research within South Africa that captures these effects from the perspectives of police officers themselves. Within SAPS, the 12-hour shift system has become entrenched, particularly in high-demand urban environments, yet empirical evidence regarding how officers experience and respond to this work arrangement remains limited. The operational benefits of extended shifts have been emphasised, while the embodied, emotional, and psychological costs borne by officers have received comparatively less attention. Existing research often treats police officers as a homogeneous group, despite evidence that age, fitness levels, years of service, and coping strategies significantly influence how officers experience long working hours (Violanti, 2014; Molokomme, 2024). This gap constrains the ability of SAPS management and policymakers to design shift schedules and support mechanisms that are responsive to employee diversity, aligned with labour legislation, and attentive to occupational health and well-being.

Arising from the problem identified above, the central research question guiding this study is: *How do SAPS police officers working 12-hour shifts experience the impact of extended shift work on their physical health and psychological well-being within a high-demand urban policing context?* To address this question in depth, the study is guided by the following sub-questions:

- *How do police officers perceive the physical effects of working 12-hour shifts, including fatigue, bodily pain, sleep disruption, and changes in overall physical well-being?*
- *How do police officers experience the emotional and psychological demands associated with prolonged shift work?*
- *What recommendations can be proposed by this study based on the findings of police officers to enhance the physical health, psychological well-being, and occupational resilience of SAPS officers working 12-hour shifts in the SAPS?*

This study seeks to make a meaningful contribution at the intersection of occupational health, policing practice, and sustainable development. By foregrounding police officers lived experiences of extended shift work, the research contributes empirical evidence that is directly relevant to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The study highlights occupational health risks within policing and the need for supportive work environments that protect mental and physical well-being. The study also contributes to SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), particularly its emphasis on safe and secure working environments and the protection of labour rights. Understanding the health implications of extended shift systems provides evidence that can inform humane shift scheduling, adequate rest provisions, and employee support mechanisms within SAPS, thereby promoting decent work conditions within a critical public service profession. Therefore, this study seeks to advance evidence-based discussions on sustainable policing practices, ethical workforce management, and the long-term well-being of police officers operating in demanding urban environments.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) and Spillover Theory (Staines, 1980; Edwards & Rothbard, 2000), providing a robust framework for understanding the physical and psychological impacts of 12-hour shifts on police officers. The JD-R Model posits that each occupation involves a balance between job demands such as physical, emotional, cognitive, and psychological stressors and job resources, including organizational support, autonomy, training, and coping strategies, which collectively influence employee well-being, engagement, and burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

In policing, extended 12-hour shifts represent significant job demands, leading to fatigue, prolonged standing, musculoskeletal discomfort, disrupted sleep, and exposure to emotionally charged incidents. Research indicates that high job demands, combined with inadequate resources, increase the risk of physical strain, emotional exhaustion, and impaired cognitive functioning (Caruso, 2014; Violanti et al., 2013). Critics contend that the model may underestimate individual differences in coping strategies and the influence of external factors, such as personal resilience and lifestyle choices. This study addresses these limitations by gathering rich, phenomenological accounts from officers, capturing individual experiences of adaptation alongside general patterns of strain.

Complementing the JD-R Model, Spillover Theory explains how stress and emotional strain from the work domain can spill over into personal life, affecting overall well-being. Edwards and Rothbard (2000) expanded this theory by identifying cognitive, affective, and behavioral mechanisms that clarify how work stress influences home life and psychological health. While useful, Spillover Theory has been criticized for not adequately accounting for context-specific variables, such as organizational culture or shift system design. This study mitigates this limitation by situating the theory within the lived experiences of SAPS officers working 12-hour shifts in Johannesburg Central, allowing for the capture of relevant factors like shift scheduling and coping mechanisms.

This study offers a comprehensive understanding of how extended shifts affect officers' physical and psychological well-being. The JD-R Model elucidates the interaction between demands and resources shaping occupational outcomes, while Spillover Theory explains how work-related stress extends into personal life. This dual-theoretical approach ensures that recommendations for mitigating the negative impacts of 12-hour shifts are grounded in the lived experiences of officers and informed by theoretical frameworks (Molokomme, 2024).

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach within an interpretivist paradigm to explore how police officers experience and interpret the physical and psychological implications of working 12-hour shifts. A phenomenological research design was employed, as it enables an in-depth examination of lived experiences and subjective meanings associated with a specific phenomenon (Van Manen, 2016). Semi-structured interviews were used to generate rich, nuanced data, allowing participants to articulate their experiences in their own words while providing the researcher with sufficient flexibility to probe emergent issues relevant to the study objectives (Kvale, 2009). The population comprised SAPS officers from any rank stationed at the Johannesburg Central policing precinct who are routinely exposed to a 12-hour shift system. Officers who had more than fifteen years of service were the only ones meeting the inclusion criteria of this study. A non-probability sampling approach, specifically purposive sampling, was employed to deliberately select participants with direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). Thirteen (n=13) police officers participated in the study, a sample size consistent with phenomenological research, where depth and richness of data are prioritised over numerical representation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data collection proceeded until data saturation was achieved, meaning that no new themes or substantive insights emerged from subsequent interviews, thus indicating adequate coverage of the research phenomenon (Denzin, 2018). Ethical approval was obtained from the Tshwane University of Technology, and a gatekeeper letter was secured from the SAPS Research Ethics Committee, granting permission to conduct interviews at the Johannesburg Central police station. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw without prejudice. The trustworthiness of the study was ensured through adherence to the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was enhanced through the use of verbatim quotations and prolonged engagement with the data; dependability and confirmability were supported by maintaining an audit trail and reflexive journaling; and transferability was strengthened through rich contextual descriptions of the research setting and participants.

Literature Review

Empirical scholarship on extended shift systems has consistently interrogated the implications of 12-hour work schedules for physical health, psychological well-being, and occupational functioning, particularly within high-risk professions such as policing. Internationally, scholars have established that prolonged work hours intensify fatigue, compromise physiological recovery, and heighten vulnerability to both acute and chronic health conditions (Tucker & Folkard, 2012; Kecklund & Axelsson, 2016; Madia, 2022). The prevailing argument across occupational health literature is that extended shifts disrupt the balance between workload, recovery time, and circadian regulation, thereby placing sustained strain on the human body (Madia, 2022).

A substantial body of evidence shows that fatigue is a significant consequence of long work hours, particularly in safety-sensitive occupations. Tucker and Folkard (2012) assert that fatigue serves as both a physiological and cognitive risk factor, increasing vulnerability to injuries and impairing alertness. This is supported by Alghamdi et al. (2017), who found that prolonged shifts lead to musculoskeletal strain and higher cardiovascular risk, especially with inadequate recovery periods. Kecklund and Axelsson (2016) emphasize that cumulative fatigue from extended schedules contributes to chronic bodily stress, manifesting as persistent pain and deteriorating health. The link between extended shifts and musculoskeletal discomfort is well-documented. Studies indicate that professions requiring prolonged standing and repetitive movements, like policing, are prone to musculoskeletal disorders affecting the lower back and extremities (Fekedulegn et al., 2017; Hubert & Aujoulat, 2018). This pain not only hampers physical functioning but also compounds psychological strain, leading to absenteeism and diminished performance. Caldwell et al. (2019) highlight that physical exhaustion exacerbates mental fatigue, impairing decision-making and increasing error likelihood.

Sleep disruption is another critical issue related to 12-hour shifts. Akerstedt (2003) found that shift work disrupts circadian rhythms, especially when extending beyond typical daytime hours. Additional research has reinforced this, showing associations between long shifts and sleep deprivation, irregular sleep patterns, and poor sleep quality (Cheng & Cheng, 2017; Sørengaard et al., 2021). Madia (2022) notes that physiological misalignment reduces restorative sleep, heightening both physical fatigue and psychological vulnerability. Gurubhagavatula et al. (2021) further argue that sleep restriction intensifies fatigue, particularly when recovery time is lacking. Moreover, extended shift systems affect lifestyle choices. Norton et al. (2018) found links between long hours and disrupted eating patterns, poor diet quality, and higher body mass index (BMI). Madia (2022) contends that extended shifts limit opportunities for regular meals and physical activity, leading to metabolic issues. Morris (2010) and Baudson et al. (2024) identified shift work as a risk factor for chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes, particularly when coupled with sleep deprivation and sedentary behavior.

The literature presents a nuanced view of the health effects of extended shifts, recognizing that individual factors such as age, physical fitness, and adaptive coping strategies can mediate these effects (Puttonen et al., 2021; Molokomme, 2024). While proactive health behaviors like exercise and proper nutrition can alleviate some negative outcomes, Puttonen et al. caution that these strategies cannot fully mitigate the physiological strain of long hours. This brings to light a debate in the literature about individual resilience versus structural responsibility, with many researchers arguing that personal adaptability should not excuse inherently demanding work systems. Psychological well-being in the context of extended shift work has also garnered significant attention. Studies by Nkosi (2019) and Shappell Hinson and Rasheed (2013) indicate that long shifts lead to higher stress levels, emotional exhaustion, and diminished psychological health among law enforcement personnel. Koranda et al. (2023) further show that extended hours impair emotional regulation, increasing irritability and burnout risk. These psychological challenges are particularly critical in policing, were officers face traumatic events and high-pressure decision-making.

Moreover, the interaction between shift work and trauma exposure amplifies psychological strain. Violanti (2012) highlights that cumulative exposure to critical incidents alongside extended hours heightens the risk of psychological fatigue and post-traumatic stress. Tsirimokou et al. (2024) argue that insufficient recovery time hampers officers' ability to process traumatic experiences, intensifying emotional exhaustion. Work-family conflict and disrupted social relationships further

compound these psychological burdens (Kossek & Thompson, 2015; Loudoun et al., 2014). Some studies suggest that 12-hour shift systems can provide benefits, such as longer recovery periods and improved work-life balance (Fischer et al., 2016; Loudoun, 2008). Madia (2022) notes that extended off-duty times can enhance social and family engagement. However, Molokomme et al. (2023) argue that these benefits are context-dependent, contingent on working conditions, workload intensity, and organizational support. Consequently, there is a growing emphasis in the literature on the need for flexible and differentiated shift arrangements, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

Within the South African context, empirical discussions of extended shift work intersect strongly with labour and occupational safety legislation. The Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA 75 of 1997) establishes limits on working hours and mandates adequate rest periods, reflecting an underlying commitment to employee health and humane working conditions (Koen, 2024; Kukuta, 2019). Similarly, the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA 85 of 1993) oblige employers to identify and mitigate workplace health risks, including those arising from fatigue and excessive workloads (Framework, 2021; Arthur, 2024). Moreso, Khosa and Abdulkareem (2024) argue that extended working hours can lead to fatigue, which may decrease productivity and weaken social cohesion between the police and the community in managing violent conflict. Therefore, Labour Relations Act reinforces the necessity of consultation and fairness in shift scheduling practices for effective service delivery (Mofokeng, 2023; Carabetta & Lorraine, 2023). Despite these legal protections, scholars have highlighted persistent gaps between legislative intent and operational realities within law enforcement agencies. Madia (2022) contends that fatigue-related impairments not only threaten officer health but also undermine public safety, ethical decision-making, and organisational effectiveness. This disjuncture between policy frameworks and occupational practice necessitates the need for empirical studies that interrogate how extended shift systems operate within specific policing contexts and how their consequences may be mitigated through evidence-based interventions.

The above literature presents a nuanced yet compelling case that 12-hour shift systems exert significant physical, psychological, and lifestyle-related pressures on law enforcement personnel. While individual adaptability and organisational benefits are occasionally acknowledged, the dominant scholarly consensus stresses that extended shifts, when inadequately managed, pose substantial risks to health, well-being, and performance. These insights provide a critical foundation for examining extended shift work within the SAPS context and for developing informed, context-sensitive recommendations aimed at safeguarding officer well-being and operational sustainability.

Findings & Discussions

Theme 1: Physical and Psychophysiological Impacts of 12-Hour Shifts

The experiences of police officers from the Johannesburg Central working 12-hour shifts reveal a diverse range of physical health impacts. Some participants reported noticeable effects on their bodies, while others claimed no challenges at all. A recurring issue among participants was fatigue and bodily pain, particularly in the lower limbs, due to prolonged standing. **SAPS1** illustrated this vividly, stating that *"[W]e becomes tired, and [e]xperience fatigue, and my feet become painful at times, because sometimes you stand for almost the whole day, and it makes one's feet to become sore".*

The other two police officers also echoed a similar sentiment about physical exhaustion, particularly towards the end of the shift: *"With me, my body feels tired, particularly during the last hours of the shift…around 16:00"* (**SAPS10**). **SAPS9** highlighted more severe physical strain: *"My hips and my back become sore as a result of working for extended 12 hours.* "Another common concern was around sleep disturbances and changes in sleeping patterns. One participant reflected on how irregular shifts interfered with their sleeping routine and stated that:

> *"Yes, regarding the sleep routine…. so, it disturbs or it has an impact on your sleep routine since it changes your routine now and then, particularly when you are on your four days off, you will sleep [n]ormally 8-hours but when it is time for work the four days…. your sleep routine is going to be impacted"* (**SAPS3**).

Similarly, other participant shared issues with *"Sleeping difficulties, because when I used to work Monday to Friday, it was well okay, now the body has been triggered, so I lose track of my sleeping order"* (**SAPS6**). For some, sleep-related issues were not just physical but potentially psychological too, as **SAPS2** admitted: *"Ehhhh not really, I have never experienced any physical health issues so far…. But I am suffering from insomnia, which I think it might affect me in the future*."

Moreover, some officers associated the shift work with broader emotional or psychological exhaustion that manifests physically. With **SAPS8** stating that *"I will start with the issue of working night shift during times of loadshedding…. It is just emotionally draining, and it affects you psychologically"*. Although this statement is more emotionally framed, the implication is that the emotional toll of shifts also weighs on the physical self. Interestingly, several participants explicitly denied any physical challenges. **SAPS4** noted, *I don't have any physical health challenges…but the 12-hour shift work is a challenge, you keep becoming tired and fatigued,"* suggesting that while not perceiving these as health "issues," the fatigue is still impactful. Other police officers who were noted by the researcher as in their younger age simply stated that *"I don't have any* (**SAPS5***),"* and *"None"* (**SAPS1**), respectively, indicating no notable health complications. **SAPS12** similarly responded, *"[N]othing from my side"*.

However, other police officers presented a contrasting perspective that is rooted in preparedness and fitness, asserting that:

> *"I have not experienced any of the challenges, and this is only because we get trained well at the college. No, no challenges; no health challenges. I come back fit, mentally and physically. I was ready for 12-hour shifts because we have also been training for 12 hours throughout the year at the police training college. So, when I came back to work, I was fit and ready"* (**SAPS13**).

Theme 2: Broader Physical Well-Being and Lifestyle Disruptions

While some officers identified direct physical ailments resulting from long working hours, many participants also discussed the broader impact of 12-hour shifts on their overall physical well-being and lifestyle patterns. Their reflections highlighted changes in energy levels, disruption of healthy routines, weight gain, sleep patterns, and a general sense of fatigue or exhaustion. Several participants emphasised how the demanding schedule made it difficult to maintain healthy habits, such as fitness routines or balanced meals. As **SAPS2** pointed out that *"It has a severe impact since you won't even have time for your fitness routines, and you know once you don't be consistent, then it becomes a problem"*. On the same vein, **SAPS6** noted that *"[i]t affected my weight, because we don't eat on time and we don't eat healthy… that is why we are even fatter."*

Fatigue was a recurring concern. **SAPS5** shared that *"It is tiring at times, and you can be stressed sometimes when you think of going to work,"* while **SAPS7** and **SAPS9** both described the experience as simply *"tiring."* In addition, **SAPS10** stressed that *"It just cripple your mind and body, and it also affects the way you think, which sometimes lead to one getting to forget things",* linking the physical toll with cognitive strain.

However, not all perceptions were negative. **SAPS4** expressed a contrasting view, stating that *"I think it is fine since it makes me physically fit and active."* Similarly, one participant took a more balanced approach, acknowledging the demands of the shift while stressing the importance of personal health maintenance, and stated that *"12 hours is not easy, and it's not difficult as well, because for you to be able to work 12 hours, you need to take care of your health, you must exercise, eat well, drink enough water, and sleep enough"* (**SAPS13**).

Sleep disruption was also noted, where **SAPS1** shared, *"Ohh, it is just that when I rest, I always oversleep,"* suggesting irregular sleep cycles as a by-product of the demanding schedule. **SAPS11** highlighted the physical strain, stating, *"Having pains in my hips and my left leg."*

Theme 3: Perceived Health Changes and Individual Coping Responses

Several participants reported experiencing noticeable changes in their physical health since transitioning to 12-hour shifts. **SAPS1** mentioned that *"Yes, you see I am old, this thing has even made me to always forget easily, because being always tired can make you forget things, considering my age*

also," suggesting a perceived cognitive decline possibly linked to fatigue. **SAPS3** shared, *"Yes… gaining more weight, because I could not juggle around the strain of the shift plus all the other activities"*. Similarly, one participant noted disturbances in their sleep cycle, saying,

> *"Yes, losing my sleeping routine, since I don't have a normal sleeping routine… Sometimes you get used to sleeping at night after you have taken leave, then when you come back from leave already you are already used to sleeping during normal hours, then that will have to change"* (**SAPS8**).

Other participants highlighted physical discomfort, with **SAPS9** citing *"back pains and pains on shoulders,"* and **SAPS10** revealing that *"My body started being sore due to fatigue"*. In contrast, others, when asked about noticing any changes in their health since working 12-hour shifts, had none, and they stated: *"No, I am fine"* (**SAPS4**) and *"There is no*" (**SAPS6**) respectively, indicating no perceived changes. **SAPS13** added a preventive perspective, saying, *"I have not experienced any, I take supplements and keep fit… suggesting that proactive health management may buffer some of the negative effects"*.

Theme 4: Psychological and Emotional Responses to Extended Shifts

Participants expressed a range of perspectives in their responses toward their feelings about working 12-hour shifts regularly. For some, the experience was overwhelmingly negative. **SAPS1** admitted, *"[I] don't feel good honestly, especially at my age"*. Similarly, **SAPS2** expressed that, *"I don't feel good at all, because sometimes when you want to sleep you can't fall asleep and when you don't want to sleep you fall asleep"*. **SAPS8** echoed this discomfort bluntly: *"I don't like working 12 hours,"* while **SAPS9** resignedly said, *it does not feel good. But what can I say… we are dedicated police officers"*. One police officer also expressed dissatisfaction with working 12-hour shifts and alluded that *"I was going to feel good about it, but since we are working here, you are always busy, there is no resting time… some of the chairs are very old and not comfortable"* **(SAPS10).**

In contrast, several participants reported having adjusted well. With **SAPS3** explaining that, *"I don't mind at all… I would say I am now used to it since I have worked for so many years,* while **SAPS4** echoing by saying, *"I feel okay since I have 4 days rest after my 4-day shift… so I am able to rest"*. Similarly, **SAPS5** noted, *"It feels good since you have 4 days off to rest… so you are then able to spend time with people,"* and **SAPS6** added, *"I am used to it, and my body is now used to working 12 hours"*. Moreover, other participants also echoed these sentiments, saying, *"I don't mind since I have 4 days off"* (**SAPS11**), and *"I don't have any problems with working a 12-hour shift, and I am now used to working 12 hours"* (**SAPS13**). **SAPS12** offered a balanced view, stating that *"I don't mind… but it is not that good, you just survive."*

Theme 5: Psychological and Emotional Strain of Extended Shifts

Several participants articulated a broad spectrum of emotional and psychological challenges that stem from long exposure to 12-hour shift work. **SAPS1** confessed that *"I lose my temper and I have realised that the strain of working a 12-hour shift for a long time has made me to be short-tempered"*. **SAPS2** similarly acknowledged that *"Even though I am not a medical practitioner, but I think insomnia affects you psychologically at times because my mind sometimes becomes tired and I fail to think properly"*. More so, **SAPS3**, had an emotional toll that was broader, as it was stressed that issues around *"[W]eight gain also affect psychological mindset, as well as not being able to spend time with family… working on public holidays does indeed have a huge psychological as well as emotional impact* (**SAPS3**).

Direct exposure to traumatic incidents also emerged. With **SAPS4** revealing that, *"[D]uring the first year of service, when I had to see dead bodies in fatal accidents, so that had affected me emotionally,"* while **SAPS11** noted, *"When I have to attend an inquest, I become disturbed and stressed as well as traumatised…I don't like to see corps"*. Other participants focused on emotionally charged situations within community interactions. **SAPS5** reflected that *"Sometimes it becomes emotional because…they tell about what they encountered, sometimes it can be emotional and you get to sympathize"*. **SAPS7** added, *"Criminals are always stressful and traumatizing…sometimes you will feel like you are losing your mind"*. The cumulative effect of the job and shift structure also emerged strongly. **SAPS8** stated, *"Being a police officer itself is stressful and depressing…add the strain of working 12-hour shifts, then you will just become emotionally drained,"* while **SAPS10** echoed, *"It is*

draining, we get insulted…this profession we always exercise emotional intelligence". **SAPS12** shared, *"Sometimes you even lose your temper, particularly on domestic violence cases".* **SAPS13** also says, *"We do be emotional…you will have an emotional breakdown asking yourself…are people expecting these horrible situations".* Only **SAPS9** mentioned, *"So far, there is none,"* which shows how the psychological impact can differ based on individual experience.

Discussion

The findings provide insight into the physical, psychological, and lifestyle-related consequences of 12-hour shifts for police officers in Johannesburg Central. These results are interpreted in harmony with the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) and Spillover Theory (Staines, 1980; Edwards & Rothbard, 2000).

Officers reported fatigue, musculoskeletal pain, and sleep disturbances. This corroborates literature showing that prolonged shifts increase physical strain and reduce alertness (Tucker & Folkard, 2012; Alghamdi et al., 2017). Soreness in the lower limbs and back aligns with findings that prolonged standing and repetitive movements elevate musculoskeletal risk (Fekedulegn et al., 2017; Hubert & Aujoulat, 2018). Sleep disruption was also evident. Officers described irregular sleep patterns and insomnia, consistent with studies showing that long shifts interfere with circadian rhythms and restorative rest (Akerstedt, 2003; Cheng & Cheng, 2017; Sørengaard et al., 2021). These outcomes are in the same vein as Madia (2022), who notes that sleep deprivation amplifies both physical and psychological vulnerability.

According to the JD-R Model, high job demands, such as extended shifts and prolonged physical exertion, overwhelm available resources like rest and organisational support (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Caruso, 2014). However, officers who reported minimal physical challenges highlight how personal resources, such as training and fitness, can buffer negative effects. This supports critiques of the JD-R Model that emphasise individual differences in coping strategies (Puttonen et al., 2021). The findings also highlighted broader lifestyle impacts. They mentioned disrupted fitness routines, irregular eating patterns, and weight gain, which corroborate findings by Norton et al. (2018) and Madia (2022). Fatigue was frequently linked to cognitive strain, consistent with Caldwell et al. (2019), who argue that physical and mental exhaustion interact to impair decision-making. Some officers reported benefits from the shift schedule, such as having longer rest periods or feeling more active. This is consistent with studies suggesting compressed schedules can improve recovery and work–life balance for some employees (Fischer et al., 2016; Loudoun, 2008). These findings align with the JD-R Model, showing that adequate personal or organisational resources can mitigate high job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

Several officers reported health changes, including weight gain, fatigue, and disrupted sleep. This is consistent with prior studies linking extended shifts to cumulative physical strain (Tucker & Folkard, 2012; Alghamdi et al., 2017). Conversely, officers who maintained proactive health behaviours reported minimal effects. This highlights the buffering role of personal resources within the JD-R framework (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) and aligns with the idea that individual resilience can mediate shift-related outcomes (Puttonen et al., 2021). Officers expressed varied psychological responses. Many reported stress, irritability, insomnia, and emotional exhaustion, consistent with Nkosi (2019), Shappell et al. (2013), and Koranda et al. (2023). Exposure to traumatic incidents further increased psychological strain, corroborating Violanti (2012) and Tsirimokou et al. (2024). These findings support Spillover Theory, showing how work stress extends into personal and social life, affecting overall well-being (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Ramey et al., 2009).

Some officers, however, adapted well to 12-hour shifts. They noted benefits from rest periods and structured routines. This aligns with literature suggesting that adequate recovery and personal coping strategies can reduce the negative impact of long shifts (Madia, 2022; Fischer et al., 2016). In this sense, psychological outcomes are not uniformly negative and depend on the balance between demands and resources. The findings illustrate the interplay between physical fatigue, disrupted sleep, and psychological strain. Physically demanding work, combined with limited recovery and lifestyle disruptions, leads to both direct physical consequences and indirect psychological effects. These effects spill over into personal life, supporting both the JD-R Model and Spillover Theory (Bakker &

Demerouti, 2017; Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). While some officers adapt successfully, the cumulative strain remains significant for many. This indicates the importance of organisational interventions, flexible scheduling, and personal health management.

Therefore, it is evident that these findings largely corroborate the literature and theoretical frameworks. 12-hour shifts pose notable physical and psychological challenges. Variation in experiences highlights the moderating effect of individual resilience, proactive health behaviours, and organisational support. While some outcomes are inconsistent with prior studies, these differences illuminate the protective role of resources. In conclusion, the JD-R Model and Spillover Theory provide a robust lens for understanding extended shift work in policing, while emphasizing the need for context-specific, evidence-based interventions.

Conclusions

This study examined the physical, psychological, and lifestyle-related impacts of 12-hour shifts on police officers in Johannesburg Central. The findings reveal that extended shifts impose significant fatigue, musculoskeletal strain, disrupted sleep, and emotional exhaustion for many officers. These experiences demonstrate how high job demands, when combined with limited resources, can negatively affect overall well-being. Additionally, the study also highlights how stress and fatigue from long shifts spill over into personal life, affecting sleep, social interactions, and family engagement. Officers' narratives show that while some adapt successfully through personal coping strategies and proactive health management, others experience cumulative physical and psychological strain. Variation in experiences shows the moderating role of individual resilience, training, and organisational support. Some officers reported minimal negative effects, particularly when they were physically fit, trained adequately, or maintained healthy routines. At the same time, others struggled with fatigue, weight changes, and emotional strain, reflecting the complex interplay between occupational demands and personal resources. Thus, this study confirms that 12-hour shifts present both challenges and potential benefits. While extended off-duty periods can provide opportunities for rest and recovery, the physical and psychological demands remain substantial for many officers. It highlights the importance of context-specific interventions to support officers' well-being while maintaining operational effectiveness.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the researchers recommend that police management consider implementing flexible shift scheduling that allows for adequate rest and recovery. Adjusting the timing and rotation of shifts can help reduce fatigue accumulation and enhance officers' ability to perform optimally. Additionally, ergonomic support, including better seating, equipment, and facilities, can help mitigate musculoskeletal strain and improve physical comfort during long shifts. Wellness programs focusing on fitness, stress management, and mental health support should also be integrated into daily routines, promoting overall resilience among officers. Monitoring workload and overtime is essential to ensure officers are not exposed to excessive strain while maintaining compliance with health and safety standards. Officers should be encouraged to maintain healthy lifestyle practices that buffer the effects of long shifts. Regular exercise, balanced nutrition, hydration, and proactive health management can reduce physical strain and improve stamina. Attention to sleep hygiene, including consistent sleep schedules and strategies to improve rest quality, can help mitigate fatigue and cognitive challenges. Officers can also benefit from developing coping mechanisms to manage stress, regulate emotions, and process traumatic experiences, which will enhance both psychological resilience and personal well-being. The police service needs to review current 12-hour shift systems to ensure they align with both operational needs and the health and well-being of officers. Policies should consider flexibility, recovery time, and supportive practices to balance the demands of policing with sustainable workforce health. Furthermore, future research should track long-term physical and psychological outcomes of extended shifts, as well as investigate how individual resilience, lifestyle factors, and organisational support interact to buffer negative effects. Evidence from such research can guide policy refinements, improve officer welfare, and support more effective policing practices.

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