

Ageing in Policing: Generating a conceptual framework for understanding wellbeing, organisational support, and operational sustainability.

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Abstract

The global trend of an ageing workforce presents complex challenges and opportunities for policing. Despite extensive scholarship on occupational stress and early-career officer wellbeing, the experiences of ageing officers remain underexplored. This paper presents a conceptual framework for understanding ageing in policing, grounded in qualitative research conducted with 36 officers aged 50 and above within the New South Wales Police Force (NSWPF), Australia. Findings reveal the interplay of individual ageing processes (physical decline, cumulative trauma, psychological strain, but also enhanced communication and mentoring skills), occupational demands (high-risk environments, shift work, and cumulative exposure to trauma), and organisational support structures (policy, wellness initiatives, mentoring programs, and retirement planning). The proposed framework highlights how outcomes, officer wellbeing, job performance, workforce retention, and retention of institutional knowledge, are shaped by the effectiveness of organisational responses in mediating the relationship between ageing and occupational stress. By integrating insights from gerontology, occupational stress theory, and organisational support theory, this framework advances conceptual and practical understanding of ageing in policing. It offers an evidence-based tool for developing policy, guiding workforce planning, and sustaining policing capacity. In doing so, the framework emphasises how ageing in policing intersects with vulnerability, trauma, and mental health impacts arising from cumulative exposure to high-stress and abusive environments, thereby directly addressing the journal's concern with abuse and its consequences. The paper concludes by considering how the framework informs practice and research across policing and other high-stress professions.

Keywords: ageing, police workforce, wellbeing, organisational support, conceptual framework, trauma

Introduction

Policing is one of the most physically, cognitively, and psychologically demanding professions (Birch, 2024; Birch, 2025; Bullock et al., 2018; Gershon et al., 2002). It requires officers to sustain resilience, decision-making acuity, and physical capacity under conditions of extreme and chronic stress (Beckley et al., 2023). While research on police wellbeing has grown substantially in the last decade (e.g., Birch, 2016; Birch et al., 2017; Beckley et al, 2023; Beckley et al, 2025a, Beckley et al, 2025b; Craven et al., 2021), most of this work has focused on recruits or early-career officers, with limited attention to later-career personnel (Birch et al., 2024). This omission is significant given global demographic shifts: the workforce is ageing across sectors, including policing (Birch, 2025; Dharmarajan, 2021; Pressman et al., 2020). As officers increasingly serve well beyond the age of 50, there is a pressing need to understand how ageing interacts with the occupational demands of policing.

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The New South Wales Police Force (NSWPF) has acknowledged this challenge, noting that only a small proportion of officers officially retire at the designated age, with many remaining in service despite cumulative injuries, psychological strain, and declining physical capacity (NSWPF, 2011). Supporting an ageing workforce is therefore a critical concern, particularly within professions characterised as high-risk, where the balance between experience and capability has direct implications for both public safety and organisational sustainability. Research on ageing in occupational health and gerontology has long recognised that physical decline, cognitive changes, and psychological vulnerability are natural elements of ageing (Dharmarajan, 2021; Pressman et al., 2020). Yet policing adds unique complexities such as heavy operational gear, unpredictable shift work, exposure to traumatic incidents, and sustained public scrutiny which can amplify the pressures faced by older officers. The experiences of ageing officers cannot be separated from broader patterns of trauma exposure and vulnerability in policing. Long-term service is characterised by cumulative encounters with violence, abuse, and high-stress incidents, all which impact officers' physical and psychological wellbeing. As research on police wellness has shown (Beckley, et al., 2023; Beckley, et al., 2025a; 2025b), organisational responses play a critical role in either safeguarding or undermining mental health. This paper therefore situates ageing officers not only within the lens of workforce planning but also within the wider issues of trauma, vulnerability, and abuse, recognising that prolonged exposure to such harms has significant implications for later-career wellbeing and institutional sustainability.

To address this knowledge gap, the NSWPF commissioned a qualitative study exploring the experiences of officers aged 50 and above. Thirty-six officers, spanning ranks from Constable to Chief Superintendent, and drawn from metropolitan, regional, and rural locations, were interviewed about their perceptions of ageing in policing (Birch et al, 2024; Birch, 2025). Thematic analysis revealed a duality in their experiences. On one hand, officers described diminished physical capacity, slower recovery from injury, and cumulative trauma manifesting in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and hypervigilance. As one officer reflected, "When you are older, you are more prone to injury. So, when you go hands on, you're probably going to get more injured than a younger person" (PO11F²). Others acknowledged the enduring impact of trauma: "And the older you get...because you remember it all. You cannot unsee things" (PO17M). On the other hand, participants emphasised enhanced communication, leadership, and mentoring capacities developed over time. "Wisdom comes with age," noted one senior officer, highlighting how later-career police are often more adept at managing conflict and guiding junior colleagues (PO6M).

These findings underscore the central tension of ageing in policing, which can be understood as the coexistence of vulnerability and strength. While officers accumulate physical and psychological strain, they also develop interpersonal skills and institutional knowledge that are invaluable to workforce sustainability. Nevertheless, many reported feelings undervalued institutionally, despite respect from younger colleagues, suggesting a gap between the contributions of older officers and the organisational frameworks designed to support them (Birch, 2025).

This paper responds to that tension by proposing a conceptual framework for understanding ageing in policing. The framework integrates three interrelated domains: (i) individual ageing factors (physical, psychological, and cognitive/experiential), (ii) occupational demands of policing (trauma exposure, operational expectations, and shift work), and (iii) organisational support structures (policies, wellness programs, retraining, and

² Interviewer code assigned to each participant sampled in Birch et. al. (2024) study.

mentoring initiatives). Outcomes such as officer wellbeing, job performance, retention, and retention of institutional knowledge are shaped by how effectively organisational supports mediate the relationship between ageing processes and occupational demands.

By situating ageing officers at the nexus of these forces, the framework advances understanding of how police organisations can respond to demographic change. It also contributes to broader debates about sustainable employment in high-risk professions, positioning ageing not merely as a liability to be managed but as a stage of professional life that, with adequate institutional support, can enrich organisational capacity.

Theoretical framing of ageing

Ageing is a multidimensional process encompassing physical, cognitive, and psychological changes. Physiologically, ageing is associated with sarcopenia (loss of muscle mass), cardiovascular decline, and reduced musculoskeletal capacity, all of which limit physical endurance and strength (Navaratnarajah & Jackson, 2016; Dharmarajan, 2021). These changes are not uniform, with significant variation between individuals, but they collectively reduce the physiological reserves needed to sustain high-risk occupations such as policing. Research has also highlighted the role of physical activity in mitigating some of these declines (McPhee et al., 2016). However, policing presents specific challenges in that officers frequently report cumulative injuries, slower recovery times, and the long-term effects of operational gear, with female officers, in particular, linking these burdens to the experience of menopause (Birch et al., 2024).

Cognitively, ageing is often associated with decline in working memory, attention, and processing speed, while semantic and procedural memory remain stable (Glisky, 2007). Some studies show that active lifestyles support more stable cognitive function (Finkenzeller et al., 2019), suggesting that occupational demands can shape cognitive trajectories. Within policing, older officers often described enhanced communication and decision-making skills, reflecting how experience compensates for cognitive slowing. This aligns with theories of crystallised intelligence³, which increases with age, and helps explain why later-career officers frequently excel in mentoring, negotiation, and conflict resolution (Horn & Cattell, 1966; Rabbitt, 2017).

Psychologically, the ageing process intersects with occupational stress in complex ways. Studies emphasise the importance of resilience factors, such as optimism and self-efficacy, for successful ageing (Bowling & Iliffe, 2011), but also highlight risks of social isolation and chronic stress (Gerino et al., 2017). For police officers, these risks are magnified by long-term exposure to trauma, with many ageing officers reporting PTSD amongst other mental health issues (Beckley et al, 2023).

Policing as a high-risk occupation

Policing, arguably, magnifies the impacts of ageing because of its unique occupational demands. Research has long identified policing as physically and psychologically taxing, with cumulative stress leading to depression, anxiety, cardiovascular problems, and premature mortality (Bullock et al., 2018; Gershon et al., 2002). Findings from the NSWPF study (Birch et al., 2024) reflect this reality with older officers describing increased injury risk, slower recovery times, and the compounding effects of years of shift work on fatigue and family life. Importantly, participants highlighted how institutional expectations often failed to account for

³ Crystallised intelligence can be understood as the ability to learn from past experiences and to apply this learning to situations over one's life, including work-related situations.

ageing: even in office-based roles, older officers remained ‘fully operational’ and could be deployed at short notice, regardless of declining physical capability (Birch et al., 2024).

At the same time, participants identified strengths gained through ageing. Senior officers frequently noted that ‘wisdom comes with age,’ referring to improved situational awareness, communication, and mentoring capacities (Birch et al., 2024). These dual realities, declining physical capacity but increasing experiential strength, highlight the paradox of ageing in policing: officers become more valuable in some respects, but are less supported institutionally to adapt to their changing capacities.

Organisational context and age diversity

The literature on age diversity in workplaces suggests that multigenerational teams can enhance collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving, but only when effectively managed (George et al., 2024; Hertel et al., 2013). Age diversity can also present challenges, including communication differences and stereotyping, unless mitigated through deliberate strategies such as reverse mentoring and inclusive management frameworks (Ali & French, 2019; Wang & Fang, 2020). The NSWPF study revealed that older officers felt respected by younger colleagues but undervalued institutionally. Many suggested that organisational support, flexible duties, structured mentoring programs, and technology training, could bridge this gap (Birch et al., 2024; Birch, 2025). These findings align with organisational psychology research, which emphasises that institutional support is critical for leveraging the benefits of age diversity while reducing its risks.

Foundations for theorising ageing in policing

Three theoretical traditions are particularly useful for conceptualising ageing in policing, first is Occupational Stress Theory. Policing involves long-term exposure to acute stressors (e.g., violence, trauma) and chronic stressors (e.g., shift work, scrutiny). Over time, these stressors accumulate, resulting in burnout, PTSD, and physical health problems (Demou et al., 2020). For ageing officers, this accumulation is profound, as one NSWPF participant observed: ‘if you do this job long enough operationally, you get some sort of damage’ (Birch et al, 2024). Second, Lifespan Development Models, in which such theorising of ageing emphasise adaptation across the life course, where individuals lose some capacities but gain others (Baltes, 1987; Fuller-Iglesias, et. al., 2009). In policing, this is reflected in the trade-off between physical decline and experiential strength: older officers may struggle with foot pursuits but excel at communication and conflict resolution. This developmental lens frames ageing not only as decline but also as an opportunity to reconfigure roles and responsibilities. Whilst third, Organisational Support Theory offers insight into how such perceived organisational support has been shown to buffer stress, increase retention, and improve wellbeing (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Eisenberger et al., 2020). Applied to ageing officers, this theory suggests that policies, wellness programs, and flexible deployment can mediate the negative impacts of ageing and maximise contributions. The NSWPF study strongly supported this: *where officers felt unsupported, morale and retention were threatened; where mentoring or alternative roles were encouraged, engagement and satisfaction were sustained*, (Birch et al, 2024).

Taken together, these theoretical frameworks inform the design of the conceptual framework, a three-domain conceptual framework. First, Occupational Stress Theory underpins the framework’s focus on cumulative exposure to operational and organisational demands. The Lifespan Development Models theorising shape the recognition that officers simultaneously lose and gain capacities as they age, a tension captured in the framework’s dual emphasis on vulnerability and strength. While Organisational Support Theory grounds the framework’s third domain, highlighting that supportive policies and practices can mediate the

effects of ageing and sustain engagement. Integrating these perspectives ensures that the framework was not only empirically grounded but also theoretically robust, positioning ageing as a dynamic process shaped by individual, occupational, and organisational factors.

Towards an integrated model

While existing research provides insights into ageing, occupational stress, and organisational support, there has been little attempt to integrate these strands into a single explanatory framework for policing. The proposed conceptual framework addresses this gap by positioning ageing officers at the nexus of individual change, occupational demand, and organisational response. In doing so, it reconceptualises ageing in policing not as an inevitable liability but as a managed process shaped by institutional choices.

Empirical basis: NSWPF study into Ageing amongst Police Officers

The present paper draws on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with NSW Police Force officers aged 50 years and over, as reported in Birch et al. (2024) and Birch (2025). The study aimed to explore how ageing impacts job performance, safety, wellbeing, and retention, with a view to identifying both individual and organisational factors that contribute to or hinder later-career engagement. Provided below is a summary to contextualise the development of the conceptual framework presented in this paper.

Methodological overview

The study by Birch et al. (2024) adopted a qualitative case study design, consistent with an interpretivist epistemology and constructivist ontology. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 36 officers across a diverse cross-section of the organisation. Participants included men and women serving at ranks ranging from Constable to Chief Superintendent, and were drawn from metropolitan, regional, and rural commands. Stratified purposive sampling ensured variation in gender, geography, and operational status, while thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework was employed to generate insights across the cohort.

This methodological approach provided rich data on subjective experiences of ageing, enabling the research team to explore both the challenges and strengths reported by officers. Ethical approval was secured from both the NSWPF and the University of Technology Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee.

Key findings

Three broad themes emerged from the analysis: experiences of ageing, occupational challenges, and future outlook.

Physical wellbeing (Birch et al., 2024): Officers consistently reported physical decline, slower recovery from injuries, and cumulative impacts of operational duties. Many described how their bodies no longer recovered as quickly as in earlier years, with chronic conditions such as back and knee injuries becoming common. As one officer explained, "Some police who get to 60, they're clearly incapable of doing the front-line stuff. The knees are buggered and everything's busted" (PO16M). Female officers also highlighted the disproportionate burden of operational gear from midlife, particularly when combined with menopause symptoms.

Psychological wellbeing (Birch et al., 2024): Mental health challenges were also widespread. Officers described anxiety, PTSD, and hypervigilance as near-inevitable outcomes of decades of exposure to trauma. One participant acknowledged, "I know I have PTSD. You can't do this job for as long as I've been doing it and not have it" (PO11M). Others described

avoidance behaviours, such as avoiding crowded public places or sitting only where exits could be monitored, reflecting the cumulative toll of long-term trauma exposure.

Strengths and experience (Birch et al., 2024): Despite physical and psychological strain, participants highlighted areas of strength gained with age. Officers emphasised enhanced communication, leadership, and mentoring capabilities, reflecting the growth of “wisdom” and interpersonal skill with service length. One officer noted, “Wisdom comes with age,” referring to an increased ability to de-escalate conflict and guide junior colleagues (PO6M). Many reported that younger colleagues respected them as mentors, even as they felt undervalued at the organisational level.

Occupational and organisational tensions (Birch et al., 2024): A consistent theme was the mismatch between institutional expectations and individual capacity. Even those in office-based roles remained “fully operational” and subject to sudden deployment. As one officer explained, “We still get asked to go out on the street... you’re still expected to perform at the level you were when you’re young” (PO10F). This created frustration and heightened injury risk for older officers.

Future outlook (Birch et al., 2024): Officers expressed mixed perspectives on their future in the force. While some intended to continue serving out of commitment and camaraderie e.g. PO5M who 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.” Other respondents were considering early retirement due to fatigue, complexity of the role, or perceived lack of institutional support. Several officers warned that without policy reform, policing risked accelerating the loss of highly experienced personnel.

Implications of findings

These empirical findings highlight the dual reality of ageing in policing that being physical and psychological vulnerability coexists with cognitive and experiential strengths. The challenges officers identified such as chronic health conditions, trauma accumulation, and institutional undervaluing, point to areas where organisational responses are critical. Equally, the strengths they described such as mentoring, leadership, and resilience, demonstrate the potential to reconceptualise ageing as an asset when appropriately supported.

These findings form the empirical foundation for the conceptual framework presented in the next section, which positions ageing officers at the intersection of individual ageing processes, occupational demands, and organisational support structures.

The conceptual framework

The conceptual framework presented here synthesises the empirical findings of the NSWPF study with the three theoretical perspectives outlined earlier. In doing so, it translates Occupational Stress Theory, Lifespan Development Models, and Organisational Support Theory into a practical model that captures the interplay between individual ageing factors, occupational demands, and organisational supports. The empirical findings from the NSWPF study illustrate that ageing in policing is not a linear process of decline, but rather a complex interplay of vulnerabilities and strengths, shaped by occupational demands and mediated by organisational responses. Building on these insights, this paper proposes a *conceptual framework for understanding ageing in policing*. The framework positions older officers at the nexus of three domains: *individual ageing factors, occupational demands of policing, and organisational support structures*. Outcomes such as wellbeing, job performance, retention, and knowledge preservation depend on how effectively organisational supports mediate the tension between individual change and occupational pressures.

Core domains of the conceptual framework

1. Individual ageing factors

Ageing officers experience a combination of physical, psychological, and cognitive changes.

- **Physical wellbeing:** Declining strength, chronic injuries, and slower recovery times were common across participants. Officers described being “an injury waiting to happen” if deployed in physically demanding situations late in their careers (PO10M). Health conditions such as diabetes and cardiac problems were also noted, highlighting the intersection of occupational strain and broader ageing processes (Birch et al., 2024).
- **Psychological wellbeing:** Participants frequently reported long-term anxiety, PTSD, and hypervigilance. For some, decades of trauma exposure blurred the boundary between professional and personal life. As one officer observed, “You cannot unsee things” (PO17M). Others described avoidance behaviours in social settings or difficulty relaxing, illustrating the cumulative toll of trauma (Birch et al., 2024).
- **Cognitive and experiential strengths:** Importantly, officers emphasised the skills that improved with age. Communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, and mentoring were repeatedly highlighted as areas of strength. “Wisdom comes with age,” one senior officer explained (PO6M), pointing to the ability to remain calm under pressure and guide younger colleagues (Birch et al., 2024).

Taken together, these elements underscore that ageing in policing is marked by a vulnerability, both physically and psychologically, alongside growth in cognitive and experiential capacity.

2. Occupational demands of policing

The second domain reflects the unique challenges of policing as a high-risk occupation.

- **Operational expectations:** Even officers in office-based or supervisory roles described being considered “fully operational” and subject to sudden deployment, regardless of age or injury status. As one officer explained, “We still get asked to go out on the street... you’re still expected to perform at the level you were when you’re young” (PO10F; Birch et al., 2024).
- **Physical demands:** Heavy gear, unpredictable shift work, and the ever-present possibility of confrontation create continuous physical strain. For older officers, these demands were particularly fatiguing, with some reporting they could no longer “bounce back” from injuries or late shifts in the way they once could (PO11F; Birch et al., 2024).
- **Psychological demands:** The mental toll of exposure to trauma, community hostility, and organisational scrutiny was amplified over decades of service. Several officers described how social media criticism of policing decisions compounded stress, while others noted that the “inevitability of damage” was accepted within the culture of long-serving officers (PO18M; Birch et al., 2024).

These occupational demands intensify the natural effects of ageing and explain why policing is often described as a “young person’s game” (PO6M) (Birch et al., 2024).

3. Organisational support structures

The third domain represents the institutional responses that can either mitigate or exacerbate the challenges of ageing.

- Policy and role flexibility: Participants suggested flexible duties, shift adjustments, and alternative career pathways as ways to extend later careers. Without such policies, officers felt pressured to continue performing tasks that were increasingly unsafe (Birch et al., 2024).
- Health and wellness program: While mental health awareness had improved in recent years, many noted that existing resources were insufficient for addressing cumulative trauma or chronic injuries. Proactive screenings and targeted interventions were frequently recommended (Birch et al., 2024).
- Training and technology: Older officers reported challenges adapting to new digital systems. Structured, hands-on technology training, tailored to different learning styles, was seen as critical to maintaining effectiveness (Birch et al., 2024).
- Mentorship and career development: Many officers valued their role in mentoring younger colleagues but suggested this contribution should be formally recognised and supported through structured programs (Birch et al., 2024).
- Retirement and transition planning: Officers expressed mixed sentiments about retirement, with some considering early exit due to fatigue and others concerned about financial and psychological readiness. Structured pre-retirement support was seen as necessary to ensure smooth transitions (Birch et al., 2024).

Where these organisational supports were present or envisioned, participants expressed greater confidence in their ability to contribute meaningfully. Where they were absent, frustration, fatigue, and disengagement were common.

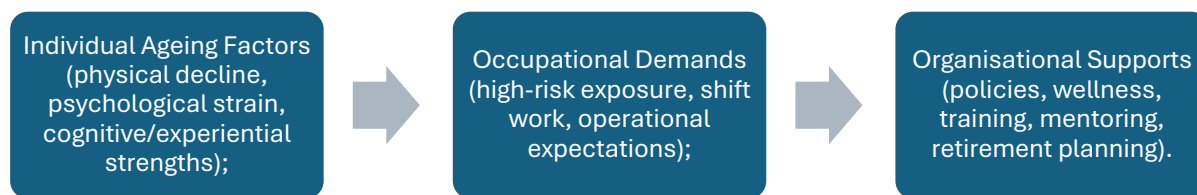
The interaction between these domains produces four principal outcomes:

1. Wellbeing - Physical and psychological health outcomes depend on whether organisational supports buffer the strain of occupational demands.
2. Job performance - Performance is enhanced when cognitive and experiential strengths are leveraged but undermined when physical limitations are ignored.
3. Retention - Officers remain engaged when organisational supports are present; in their absence, early retirement becomes more likely.
4. Knowledge retention - Structured mentoring and flexible roles allow organisations to retain institutional knowledge that would otherwise be lost with officer attrition.

The framework emphasises that organisational support structures are not peripheral but central. They function as mediators, shaping whether the relationship between individual ageing and occupational demands results in positive or negative outcomes. For example, without role flexibility, physical decline translates into increased injury risk and early retirement. With flexibility, the same decline can be managed by redeploying officers into mentoring or investigative roles, thereby extending careers and preserving expertise. Similarly, cumulative trauma can either erode wellbeing and performance or, with proactive wellness programs, be mitigated through early intervention and resilience-building strategies.

The framework can be illustrated through a diagram showing three interlocking domains of, 1. Individual ageing factors, 2. Occupational demands and 3. Organisational supports. This is also captured in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Ageing in Policing: A Conceptual Framework



Source: Author created.

At the centre sits the ageing officer, with arrows showing interactions between domains. Outcomes - wellbeing, performance, retention, and knowledge preservation, emerge as products of how effectively supports mediate between individual factors and occupational demands.

This conceptual framework reframes ageing in policing as a dynamic process rather than a static problem of decline. By integrating individual, occupational, and organisational domains, it provides both an explanatory model and a practical tool for guiding policy. It highlights the agency of police organisations in shaping whether ageing officers are supported as assets or left to struggle with unrealistic expectations placed on them.

Policy and practice implications

The conceptual framework outlined above demonstrates that ageing in policing is shaped not only by individual factors but also by the interplay between occupational demands and organisational responses. This has direct implications for workforce planning, officer wellbeing, and the sustainability of policing as a profession. The NSWPF study (Birch et al. 2024) highlighted several areas where policy innovation and practical interventions are urgently needed.

Workforce sustainability

Retention of experienced officers is essential for workforce stability and institutional knowledge preservation. However, many participants reported considering early retirement due to physical decline, fatigue, and lack of organisational recognition. Without targeted supports, policing risks accelerated attrition among its most skilled and experienced staff. Flexible role design such as creating more investigative, training, or supervisory pathways would allow officers to remain engaged while reducing physical strain. Policies that value longevity, rather than treating ageing as decline, are critical to sustaining workforce capacity.

Health and wellbeing

Physical and psychological wellbeing emerged as central concerns in the NSWPF study (Birch et al., 2024). Officers described cumulative injuries, slower recovery, and chronic health conditions that undermined operational effectiveness. Many also reported PTSD, hypervigilance, and anxiety as long-term consequences of trauma exposure. To address these challenges, police organisations should adopt proactive health and wellbeing strategies, including: 1. *Routine health screenings* for chronic conditions, injuries, and psychological stress; 2. *Targeted wellness programs* integrating physical rehabilitation, mental health care, and trauma-informed support, and 3. *Preventative approaches* to reduce injuries, such as ergonomic equipment reviews and early intervention for musculoskeletal issues.

Embedding these measures within policy would not only improve individual wellbeing but also reduce organisational costs linked to sick leave, workers' compensation, and premature retirement.

These findings also speak directly to broader debates about trauma and vulnerability in policing. Ageing officers described the cumulative toll of exposure to violence, abuse, and high-stress environments, which not only shaped their physical and psychological wellbeing but also influenced their willingness to remain in service. The framework therefore contributes to understanding the long-term consequences of work-related trauma, highlighting that without adequate organisational supports, exposure to abuse can accelerate attrition and undermine workforce sustainability. In this respect, the model aligns closely with the journal's concern for the impacts of abuse and the importance of organisational responses in mitigating harm (Birch, 2024; Beckley et al., 2023; Beckley et al., 2025a, 2025b).

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that ageing in policing is best understood as a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of individual change, occupational demands, and organisational support. The proposed conceptual framework moves beyond deficit models of decline to show how later-career officers embody both vulnerabilities and strengths. While physical decline, cumulative trauma, and psychological strain are clear challenges, officers also develop communication, mentoring, and leadership capacities that are central to organisational sustainability.

The research conducted with ageing officers in the NSW Police Force demonstrates that outcomes such as wellbeing, performance, retention, and knowledge preservation are not inevitable but contingent. They depend on how effectively organisational structures mediate the tension between the realities of ageing and the demands of policing. Flexible deployment, proactive wellness initiatives, targeted training, and structured retirement planning emerge as critical mechanisms for ensuring that older officers remain valued contributors rather than sidelined liabilities. By integrating occupational stress theory, lifespan development models, and organisational support theory, the framework contributes to both conceptual understanding and practical reform. It challenges police organisations to reconsider how they manage demographic change, and it offers policymakers an evidence-based tool for workforce planning in high-stress professions. More broadly, ageing can be reconfigured as an organisational asset when supported appropriately, rather than treated solely as a risk to be managed.

Future research should build on this framework by testing its applicability across policing jurisdictions and extending it to comparable professions such as corrections, fire and rescue, and emergency medicine. In doing so, academics and practitioners alike can ensure that later-career officers are not only sustained in service but enabled to thrive, retaining their expertise for the benefit of police organisations and the communities they serve. By positioning ageing as both a site of vulnerability and resilience, the framework underscores the critical need for trauma-informed and abuse-aware organisational policies that safeguard mental health, sustain officer wellbeing, and preserve institutional knowledge (Birch, 2024; Birch et al., 2017; Craven et al., 2020).

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