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Beyond the Call of Duty: A Systematic Review of First Responder Motivation

First responders—including police officers, sheriffs, firefighters, emergency medical technicians (EMTs), paramedics, and search and rescue (SAR) teams—play a vital role in protecting communities during crises. Their work demands significant personal sacrifice, exposing them to extreme stress, physical danger, and emotional burdens that impact job satisfaction, retention, and overall effectiveness. While motivation in public service has been widely studied, a comprehensive synthesis of first responder motivation remains lacking. This study systematically reviews the literature using the PRISMA framework, analyzing 74 peer-reviewed studies published up to January 2025. Drawing from key motivational theories—including Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Public Service Motivation—this review identifies both intrinsic and extrinsic factors influencing first responders. Findings reveal that while a sense of duty, recognition, job security, and organizational culture are critical motivational drivers, significant research gaps remain, particularly in understanding differences across first responder roles. This study highlights emerging research trends, synthesizes key findings, and provides recommendations for future research to enhance motivation, retention, and well-being among first responders.

Presentation Theme: This presentation explores the critical role of first responders—police officers, sheriffs, firefighters, EMTs, paramedics, and SAR teams—in emergency management. By systematically reviewing existing research on first responder

motivation, it identifies key intrinsic and extrinsic factors influencing their job performance, retention, and well-being. This study highlights emerging trends, research gaps, and practical recommendations to improve first responder resilience and effectiveness in crisis response. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of workforce challenges in emergency management and inform strategies for sustaining a dedicated and motivated first responder workforce.

Collaborators, Advisor(s) and Department(s) that assisted with this research:

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