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The mediating role of regulatory emotional self-efficacy in the link between perceived stress and suicide probability among police officers in Türkiye

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the mediating role of regulatory emotional self-efficacy in the association between perceived stress and suicide probability. Data were collected from 855 Turkish police officers (85.8% men; $M = 35.68$, $SD = 8.83$) through an online self-report survey. Results indicated that perceived stress had a significant positive direct effect on suicide probability and a significant negative impact on regulatory emotional self-efficacy. Regulatory emotional self-efficacy was found to have a significant negative direct effect on suicide probability. Moreover, regulatory emotional self-efficacy partially mediated the association between perceived stress and suicide probability. These findings suggest that enhancing police officers' regulatory emotional self-efficacy can buffer the impact of perceived stress and reduce suicidal tendencies.

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Police officers; perceived stress; suicide probability; regulatory emotional self-efficacy; Mediation analysis

Introduction

Police officers face a disproportionately high risk of suicide due to their frequent exposure to stressful and traumatic situations, compounded by the stigma surrounding mental health in policing, which often prevents help-seeking and exacerbates vulnerability to suicidal ideation and behaviour (Craw, 2022). For instance, in the United States, 172 police officers died by suicide in 2018 and 228 in 2019 (ABC News, 2020). In the United Kingdom, 217 officers died by suicide between 2001 and 2012 (UK National Statistical Institute, 2020). Similarly, in Türkiye, 341 police officers died by suicide between 2001 and 2012 (Harmancı et al., 2015). Despite these alarming figures, little research has examined suicidal tendencies and associated factors among Turkish police officers. Chronic stress combined with limited access to mental health support appears to increase officers' suicide risk significantly (Drew & Martin, 2021). Identifying protective factors such as regulatory emotional self-efficacy is therefore critical in mitigating the impact of stress on suicide probability.

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Suicide, the intentional act of ending one's life, represents a profound public health concern and one of the leading causes of death globally (Sarigül et al., 2023). According to the World Health Organization (2020), over 800,000 people die by suicide each year, with one death occurring every 40 s. Suicide rates have risen by 45% worldwide over the last four decades (Eşsizoglu & Sercan, 2017). In 2016, OECD data indicated that Latvia had the highest suicide rate (21.9%), while Canada reported the lowest (7.8%); Türkiye's rate was 16.1% (Şen, 2019). These statistics demonstrate the global and national urgency of addressing suicide as a critical mental health challenge.

The policing profession is uniquely structured, characterised by irregular work hours, insufficient wages, limited physical resources, frequent exposure to violence and traumatic events, communication difficulties with superiors, and uncertainty regarding career advancement (Korkut, 2012). These occupational stressors differ from those in many other professions and may place officers at heightened risk for stress-related mental health issues, including suicide. Stress occurs when individuals perceive environmental demands as exceeding their coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and it can negatively impact their well-being and mental health (Yıldırım & Green, 2024; Yıldırım & Solmaz, 2020). Studies have documented that police officers experience high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (five times greater than the general population) and depression (15% prevalence) (Police Research Forum, 2019). If unaddressed, chronic stress may escalate into emotional exhaustion, burnout, and suicidal behaviour (Çam & Çakır, 2008; Hu et al., 2023). Prior research has consistently linked stress to suicide cases, attempts, and suicidal tendencies among police officers (Barron, 2010; Berg et al., 2003; Gök et al., 2004; Kapusta et al., 2010; Şen, 2021; Taşdemir, 2007; Violanti, 2004). Accordingly, the first aim of this study is to re-examine the relationship between perceived stress and suicidal probability in police officers.

Violanti et al. (2008) stressed that police officers have difficulties in coping with the stress they experience individually, and emphasised that especially the police officers working on the street have a lot of difficulties and are traumatised in coping with the stressful situations they are exposed to. In this respect, the effect of stress can cause a loss of control over time. Concurrently, it was reported that police officers experience post-traumatic stress disorder 5 times more than the general population, and 15 out of every 100 police officers experience depression (Police Research Forum, 2019). In addition, Çam and Çakır (2008) reported that experiencing stress by police officers can cause them to experience more emotional and physiological problems and ultimately experience burnout. It may bring detrimental consequences if individuals do not have enough resources to deal with perceived stress effectively (Geçer & Yıldırım, 2023; Hu et al., 2023; Moroń et al., 2023; Rehman et al., 2023). One of these consequences is suicide. As a factor, leading stress is found to be the reason for the suicides resulting in the death of the police officers (Gök et al., 2004). The relationship of stress with police suicide was well-defined in suicide cases (Kapusta et al., 2010; Şen, 2021; Taşdemir, 2007), in suicide attempts (Barron, 2010; Berg et al., 2003; Violanti, 2004), and in suicidal tendencies (Harmanacı et al., 2015; Mrevlje, 2018). Thus, the first aim of the current study is to re-establish the relationship between police officers' perceived stress levels and their suicidal tendencies.

Difficulties in regulating negative emotions are among the most significant risk factors for adverse mental health outcomes, including suicidal ideation and attempts

(Colmenero-Navarrete et al., 2022). Police officers, often described as ‘emotional workers’ due to the emotionally demanding nature of their duties (Bakker & Heuven, 2006), may be particularly vulnerable to poor outcomes when emotion regulation is impaired. Regulatory emotional self-efficacy a construct integrating emotional intelligence and self-efficacy (Totan et al., 2010) represents an individual’s belief in their ability to recognise, manage, and transform emotional experiences effectively (Caprara et al., 2008). This capacity is critical for alleviating negative emotional states (e.g. anger, sadness, frustration) and for expressing positive emotions (e.g. joy, enthusiasm) in challenging circumstances.

A growing body of evidence highlights the importance of regulatory emotional self-efficacy in buffering the effects of stress across populations. Research has identified significant associations between self-regulation skills and stress among police officers (Aslam & Sohail, 2014; Duran et al., 2021; Kurniawati, 2020; Love-Abigail, 2019; Patapas et al., 2015; Patterson et al., 2012; Zeng et al., 2020), firefighters (Makara-Studzirska et al., 2019), and students (Asıcı & Uygur, 2017). Moreover, systematic reviews have demonstrated that deficits in emotion regulation are strongly linked with suicidal thoughts and attempts across adolescents and adults (Colmenero-Navarrete et al., 2022; Rogier et al., 2024). Regulatory emotional self-efficacy has also been shown to mediate the relationship between stress and well-being among British police officers (Duran et al., 2021), and between sleep disturbances and suicide risk among firefighters (Serrano et al., 2023).

The present study

To our knowledge, no prior research has examined the mediating role of regulatory emotional self-efficacy in the relationship between perceived stress and suicide probability among police officers in Türkiye. Given the unique occupational stressors in policing and the paucity of research in this context, this study aims to fill this gap. Specifically, we investigate whether regulatory emotional self-efficacy mediates the relationship between perceived stress and suicide probability. Understanding this mediation is crucial, as regulatory emotional self-efficacy can be enhanced through psychoeducational and intervention programmes, potentially reducing suicide risk. Based on the theoretical and empirical evidence reviewed, we hypothesise that:

1. Perceived stress will negatively predict regulatory emotional self-efficacy and positively predict suicide probability.
2. Regulatory emotional self-efficacy will negatively predict suicide probability.
3. Regulatory emotional self-efficacy will mediate the relationship between perceived stress and suicide probability.

Method

Participants

A total of 855 police officers participated in the study. Their mean age was 35.68 years (SD = 8.83; range = 21–55). The majority were male (85.8%), single (66.4%), held a university degree (58.0%), and were employed in support units (30.3%). [Table 1](#) presents a detailed description of participants’ demographic characteristics.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics on police officers' characteristics.

Variable Level		<i>n</i>	%	Cumulative %
Gender	Women	121	14.2	14.2
	Men	734	85.8	100.0
Marital Status	Single	287	33.6	28.8
	Married	568	66.4	95.2
Education	High School	78	9.1	9.1
	Two-year Degree	254	29.7	38.8
	University	496	58.0	96.8
	Master	25	2.9	99.8
	PhD	2	.2	100.0
Department/Unit	Operational Police Station	255	29.8	29.8
	Police Station	190	22.2	52.0
	Traffic Unit	62	7.3	59.3
	Riot Police	89	10.4	69.7
	Support Unit	259	30.3	100.0

Measures

Suicide probability scale (SPS)

The SPS was originally developed by Cull and Gill (1988) to assess suicide probability and was adapted into Turkish by Batıgün-Durak and Şahin-Hisli (2018). The scale includes 36 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = never/rarely, 4 = most of the time/always). Total scores range from 36 to 144, with higher scores indicating greater suicide risk. A sample item is 'I feel isolated from people.' The SPS measures four factors: social support/self-perception, anger/impulsivity, hopelessness/loneliness, and suicidal thoughts. For this study, a total score was calculated by summing all items. Cronbach's alpha coefficients in the Turkish adaptation ranged from .71 to .81, while in the current study, reliability values were .81, .71, .73, and .75 for the respective subscales.

Depression, anxiety, and stress scale-21 (DASS-21)

Stress was assessed using the stress subscale of the DASS-21 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), adapted into Turkish by Akın and Çetin (2007). This subscale consists of 7 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale (0 = did not apply to me at all, 3 = applied to me very much/most of the time). A sample item is 'I found it hard to wind down.' Subscale scores range from 0 to 42, with higher scores indicating greater stress. In the Turkish adaptation, Cronbach's alpha for the stress subscale was .92, and in the present study it was .93.

Regulatory emotional self-Efficacy scale

The Regulatory Emotional Self-Efficacy Scale (RESE; Caprara et al., 2008), adapted into Turkish by Totan (2014), was used to measure officers' perceived ability to regulate their emotions. The scale contains 12 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not well at all, 5 = very well). A sample item is 'How well can you express joy when good things happen to you?' The Turkish adaptation confirmed a two-factor structure: regulating positive emotions and regulating negative emotions. Cronbach's alpha coefficients in the adaptation were .60 for the total scale, .69 for positive regulation, and .52 – .59 for negative regulation. In this study, reliability was substantially higher: .93 for the total scale, .83 – .85 for negative emotion regulation (hopelessness/distress and anger/annoyance), and .86 for positive emotion regulation.

Procedure

This study employed a cross-sectional design. Data collection took place in designated meeting halls. Participants were briefed about the study's purpose, assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and provided informed consent. They then completed the questionnaires in paper – and – pencil format. A researcher supervised the process to minimise collector bias.

All procedures adhered to the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committees and to the 1964 Helsinki Declaration (and subsequent amendments). Ethical approval and permission were obtained from the Mersin Police Department prior to data collection.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS 23 and AMOS 22. Pearson product – moment correlations were conducted to examine associations among variables. To test the mediating role of regulatory emotional self-efficacy, direct and indirect effects were estimated using bootstrapping procedures. Partial mediation was defined as both a significant direct effect of stress on suicide probability (c') and a significant indirect effect via regulatory emotional self-efficacy ($a \times b$). Full mediation was defined as a non-significant direct effect alongside a significant indirect effect. Preliminary analyses confirmed that assumptions of independence, linearity, homoscedasticity, normality, and multicollinearity were met, supporting the suitability of the dataset for further analysis.

Results

The findings regarding the suicide probability levels of police officers are presented in Table 2.

As shown in Tables 2 and 3 officers scored in the 'very low,' 123 in the 'low,' 591 in the 'medium,' 107 in the 'high,' and 31 in the 'very high' suicide probability categories.

The descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients between variables are given in Table 3.

As seen in Table 3, perceived stress was positively correlated with suicide probability ($r = .52$) and negatively correlated with regulatory emotional self-efficacy ($r = -.46$). In addition, suicide probability was negatively correlated with regulatory emotional self-efficacy ($r = -.47$). Figure 1 presents the mediating role of regulatory emotional self-efficacy in the relationship between perceived stress and suicide probability.

As shown in Figure 1, the total (c), direct (c'), and indirect ($a \times b$) effects of perceived stress on suicide probability are displayed. The overall effect of perceived stress on

Table 2. Suicide probability levels of police officers participating in the study.

Suicidal Probability Level	n	%	Total
Very Low	3	.4	.4
Low	123	14.4	14.7
Medium	591	69.1	83.9
High	107	12.5	96.4
Very High	31	3.6	100.0

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients among variables.

Variables	Mean	Sd	α	1	2	3
1 – Perceived stress	8.55	7.82	.90	1		
2 – Suicidal probability	61.39	12.07	.87	.52**	1	
3 – Regulatory emotional self-efficacy	42.37	8.42	.91	-.46**	-.47**	1

** $p < .001$

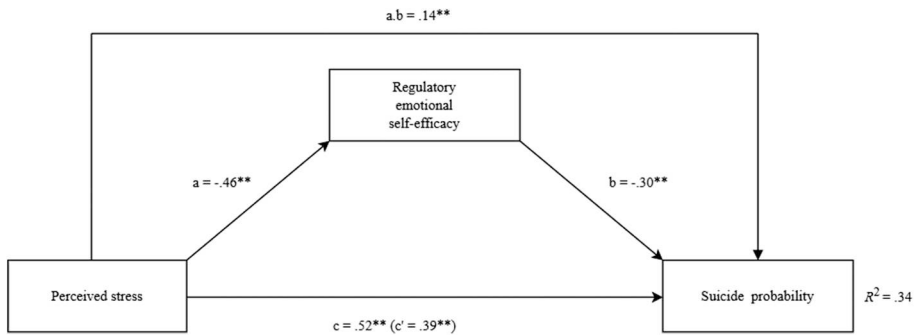


Figure 1. Total (c), direct (c') and indirect (a.b) effects of perceived stress on suicidality among police officers.

suicide probability was positive and significant ($\beta = .52$, 95% CI [.47, .57]). The direct path from perceived stress to regulatory emotional self-efficacy was negative ($\beta = -.46$, 95% CI [-.51, -.41]), while regulatory emotional self-efficacy had a negative effect on suicide probability ($\beta = -.30$, 95% CI [-.37, -.23]). The direct effect of perceived stress on suicide probability was positive ($\beta = .38$, 95% CI [.31, .46]), and the indirect effect through regulatory emotional self-efficacy was also significant ($\beta = .14$, 95% CI [.10, .18]). These findings indicate that regulatory emotional self-efficacy partially mediates the relationship between perceived stress and suicide probability. Together, perceived stress and regulatory emotional self-efficacy explained 34% of the variance in suicide probability.

Discussion

There is limited research on suicide probability among police officers in Türkiye, restricting our understanding of contributing factors and potential protective mechanisms. This study examined the direct and indirect effects of perceived stress and regulatory emotional self-efficacy on suicide probability among police officers. The findings generally supported the proposed hypotheses.

A considerable proportion of participants reported elevated levels of suicide probability: 69.1% were in the medium range, and 16.1% in the high to very high range. These figures are comparable to international findings. For example, Berg et al. (2003) reported that 24% of police officers experienced frequent suicidal thoughts, while Swane-poel and Pienaar (2004) and Korkut (2012) also found higher suicide rates among police officers compared to the general population. In Türkiye, the police suicide rate (15.4 per thousand) substantially exceeds the general population rate (3.62 per thousand), underscoring the occupational risks faced by this group.

The first hypothesis (H1), predicting a significant positive relationship between perceived stress and suicide probability, was supported. Police work involves chronic exposure to stressors such as heavy workload, lack of personal time, financial strain, and frequent contact with difficult or traumatic situations. These stressors contribute directly to suicidality, as demonstrated in both Turkish studies (e.g. Gök et al., 2004; Harmancı et al., 2015; Şen, 2021; Taşdemir, 2007) and international research (e.g. Berg et al., 2003; Loo, 2003; Violanti, 2004). Stress thus emerges as a primary factor driving suicidality in police officers, making effective stress management a crucial target for prevention efforts.

The second hypothesis (H2), that stress negatively predicts regulatory emotional self-efficacy, was also confirmed. Police officers experiencing higher stress reported reduced confidence in their ability to regulate emotions. Although few studies have examined this relationship in Turkish police populations, findings from other occupational groups (e.g. Asıcı & Uygur, 2017; Yahyagil & İker, 2009) and international police samples (e.g. Aslam & Sohail, 2014; Duran et al., 2021; Patterson et al., 2012) consistently support the inverse association between stress and emotional regulation. These findings highlight that regulatory emotional self-efficacy may act as a protective factor against occupational stress.

The third hypothesis (H3), predicting a negative relationship between regulatory emotional self-efficacy and suicide probability, was supported. Police officers with greater regulatory emotional self-efficacy reported lower suicide probability, consistent with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional stress model, which emphasises emotion regulation as a key protective process. Although few studies have examined this link directly in police populations, evidence from related contexts (e.g. Choi et al., 2013; Taşdemir, 2007) suggests that effective emotion regulation fosters resilience and reduces vulnerability to suicidality.

Finally, the fourth hypothesis (H4), predicting that regulatory emotional self-efficacy mediates the relationship between stress and suicide probability, was confirmed. Officers with stronger emotional self-regulation skills appeared better able to buffer the negative impact of stress, thereby reducing their suicide probability. Although this is the first study to directly test this mediation model in police officers, similar patterns have been found in other populations (Duran et al., 2021; Serrano et al., 2023; Ward-Ciesielski et al., 2018). These findings suggest that interventions aimed at strengthening regulatory emotional self-efficacy may mitigate the detrimental effects of stress on suicide risk.

Implications, limitations, and recommendations

Evidence-based practices such as mindfulness-based stress reduction (Bishop, 2002; Grossman et al., 2004) and cognitive-behavioural therapy (Beck, 1995) may help strengthen regulatory emotional self-efficacy. Emotional intelligence training, which develops skills in recognising, understanding, and managing emotions, could complement these interventions by improving officers' coping strategies. Additionally, resilience-building programmes focused on stress management and adaptive coping may provide long-term benefits for psychological well-being and suicide prevention. Implementing emotional self-regulation programmes across all ranks of the police force should therefore be considered a priority by leaders and managers.

The findings also suggest that low regulatory emotional self-efficacy may exacerbate the negative effects of stress. Officers who perceive themselves as lacking the skills to

cope with occupational challenges may experience a vicious cycle of stress, which heightens suicide risk. By contrast, strong regulatory emotional self-efficacy can buffer the impact of stress, reducing both psychological strain and the likelihood of suicidal thoughts or behaviours. These results highlight the urgent need for more empirical research on police suicidality in order to develop tailored, evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies.

This study represents the first scientific investigation in Türkiye to examine the mediating role of regulatory emotional self-efficacy in the relationship between stress and suicidality among police officers. Nonetheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study sample consisted only of police officers from Mersin province, limiting generalisability. Future studies should recruit larger and more diverse samples across police organisations in all 81 provinces of Türkiye. Second, the relatively small number of high-ranking officers included in the sample may have restricted the scope of findings; further research should aim to include a broader representation of ranks. Third, the cross-sectional design prevents conclusions about causality. Longitudinal studies would allow examination of temporal and causal relationships between perceived stress, regulatory emotional self-efficacy, and suicide risk. Finally, future research should incorporate mixed-methods designs, including qualitative data, to provide a more nuanced understanding of social support, organisational stressors, and hierarchical dynamics in police suicidality.

This study demonstrated that regulatory emotional self-efficacy mediates the relationship between perceived stress and suicide probability. Specifically, officers experiencing higher levels of perceived stress tend to report lower regulatory emotional self-efficacy, which in turn increases their suicide risk. Given this mitigating role, psychologists and mental health professionals working within the police force should prioritise interventions that enhance regulatory emotional self-efficacy, particularly among officers experiencing high stress.

Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Mersin Police Department in Türkiye.

Informed consent

Consent was obtained from all participants included in the study.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Research data policy and data availability statements

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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