

# **Chief Fire Officer Perspectives on the Current Social Justice Movement**

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by

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## **Abstract**

Following the death of George Floyd in May 2020, law enforcement engaged in a national conversation that led to changes in training, response, policies, and culture. Fire & EMS are public safety partners with law enforcement but have not engaged in a similar national conversation. The study sought to understand why this conversation is not occurring. Utilizing a qualitative research design, chief fire officers were asked for their perceptions of the social justice movement, its influence on law enforcement, and its potential influence on fire & EMS. Ten chief fire officers, all executive leadership graduates, provided interviews via virtual meeting software. Following a Generic Qualitative Inquiry process, the interviews were recorded and transcribed, then coded into subthemes and themes. Themes included understanding the social justice movement, the lived experiences of participants, social justice influences on public safety services, wide ranging discourse on social justice, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and potential solutions to advance social justice within fire & EMS. These results revealed that chief fire officers are aware of the social justice movement and its potential influence on fire & EMS. Study participants encouraged proactive change to embrace social justice within fire & EMS. Recommendations emerged that include providing training on facilitating difficult conversations and recognizing biases as well as reimagining company officer responsibilities for social justice and creating a focus on community engagement. The study was limited by the small number of participants but provides rich opportunities for future research to advance the profession.

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The United States fire service has long struggled with issues of diversity, especially racial and gender inequities (Edwards, 2005). For this reason, legacy social justice movements have had significant impact on the fire service, such as a 1973 consent decree requiring the Cincinnati Fire Department to hire black male firefighters in attempt to match diversity within the fire department to diversity within the community (Compton & Granito, 2002). In 2020, a new social justice movement arose with similar potential to significantly impact the fire service. Understanding chief fire officer perceptions of the current social justice movement will help to estimate the potential impact on the fire service.

### Background

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd perished during an encounter with police in Minneapolis, Minnesota after a white police officer kneeled on the neck of Floyd, a black man (Wu et al, 2020). The video footage taken at the time of Floyd's death circulated and left viewers shocked at the callous behavior of the police as Floyd lay dying under the officer's knee (Onwuachi-Willing, 2021). Public anger over Floyd's death led to nationwide protests throughout the summer of 2020 and inspired the rise of a social justice movement that has expanded to magnify and recognize many other killings of unarmed black persons by white police officers (Wu et al, 2020).

Public scrutiny resulting from the rise of the current social justice movement has led to substantial impacts on the delivery of emergency services across the nation (Hibert, 2021). Calls to defund the police in support of social justice represent existential threats to some law enforcement agencies and have resulted in re-imagining the traditional role of law enforcement within the community (Goulka et al, 2021). For example, concerns regarding the delivery of

emergency mental health care have featured prominently in the social justice movement, with law enforcement traditionally the lead agency in responding to these incidents (Dholakai & Gilbert, 2021). Social justice concerns have prompted the creation of combined crisis intervention teams including medics, social workers, and sometimes law enforcement that have replaced the traditional police response to these incidents (Dholakia & Gilbert, 2022). In addition to mental health, the social justice movement has evolved to span a variety of issues including racial equity, LGBTQ+ rights, and gun violence, among other issues (Clingan, 2021).

### **Significance of the Study**

Public scrutiny spurred elected officials to confront racism and police abuse (Hibert, 2021). Reforms have been proposed at local, state, and national levels including chemical and physical restraint of persons under arrest and the repeal of qualified immunity (Nielson & Walker, 2020). There are also efforts to require individual police officers to purchase and maintain professional liability insurance to replace any liability coverage provided by their employer (Ramirez et al, 2019). These and other reforms proposed within the social justice movement reconsider many of the basic premises of modern policing (Goulka et al, 2021).

Fire and EMS agencies are not immune to reforms resulting from the current social justice movement. Elijah McClain, a young black man, was killed during a violent arrest by Aurora, Colorado police officers in August 2019 (Almasy, 2022). During the arrest attempt, McClain struggled with police officers. Paramedics called to the scene attempted to sedate McClain by injecting Ketamine as a chemical restraint (Almasy, 2022). However, an autopsy later determined that paramedics administered an overdose of Ketamine, resulting in McClain's death (Almasy, 2022).

McClain's death led to intense public scrutiny, especially when an independent panel later determined that there was no justification for his arrest (Tompkins, 2022). Three police officers and two fire department paramedics were suspended without pay after being indicted in McClain's death (Tompkins, 2022). They, along with other police officers and the City of Aurora, are facing a civil lawsuit by McClain's family (Tompkins, 2022). Those cases remain on-going as of this writing.

McClain's death has led to increased scrutiny of the use of chemical restraints, particularly Ketamine, for law enforcement rather than medical purposes. The American College of Emergency Physicians and the American Society of Anesthesiologists released a joint statement in opposition of the use of Ketamine or any other sedative to restrain a person for law enforcement purposes absent a legitimate medical need (American Society of Anesthesiologists, 2020). In 2021, the Colorado General Assembly passed a law regulating the use of Ketamine as chemical restraint (HB21-1251, 2021). The law applies to EMS providers, regulating treatment standards, required equipment, and mandatory training, among other items (HB21-1252, 2021). Failure of EMS providers to comply with the provisions could be considered misconduct (HB21-1251, 2021).

Many of these reforms have significant implications for fire service operations, such as the move to reduce or end police involvement with persons experiencing a mental health crisis (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Policymakers re-imagining the role of law enforcement may shift funding and/or duties away from law enforcement onto other community services including fire and EMS organizations (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Key elements of these reforms include leveraging organizations outside the criminal justice structure and undoing past trauma through the establishment of trust and legitimacy (Goff et al, 2019).

## **Problem Statement**

Social issues, past and present, are a top concern in the United States, and have led to the emergence of the current social justice movement the nation is experiencing (Clingan, 2021). We know that the social justice movement has increased public scrutiny of law enforcement agencies, calling into question commonly used police procedures (Shjarback et al, 2017). We know that fire and EMS agencies work closely with law enforcement when responding to critical life-or-death incidents (Geuzinge et al, 2020). We also know that fire and EMS agencies share similar risks for receiving public scrutiny (Bendersky, 2018). We do not know if chief fire officers are aware of, appreciate, or have addressed, the risks of public scrutiny faced by fire and EMS agencies.

## **Purpose Statement**

Since fire and EMS agencies work closely with law enforcement, responding to similar incidents and sharing certain common procedures, fire and EMS agencies could receive public scrutiny like that being experienced by law enforcement. A review of existing literature determined that there was no relevant literature focused on public scrutiny of fire and EMS agencies from the current social justice movement, revealing a significant gap in literature and knowledge to be filled by this study. To close this gap, the study sought to determine if chief fire officers were aware of how the social justice movement has affected law enforcement and how it could, or is currently, affecting fire and EMS agencies. The study also sought to determine the effects chief fire officers believe their agencies are facing from the social justice movement and what they believe could be done to address the impacts.

## **Research Questions**

Three research questions were developed from the problem and purpose statements. The first research question asked, “In what ways are chief fire officers aware of impacts to the fire service and EMS agencies because of the current social justice movement?” The second research question asked, “To what extent have changes within their fire and EMS organization occurred as a result of the current social justice movement?” Finally, the third research question asked, “What future impacts, if any, are foreseen for the fire and EMS fields, because of the social justice movement, and what is recommended to address these?”

## **Summary**

The remaining sections of this research proposal provide the structural framework to support the research process. Chapter 2 includes a thorough review of the existing academic literature, revealing gaps within the literature to be filled by the study. Chapter 3 provides the research approach and methodology necessary to fill the gaps identified in the existing literature. Chapter 4 reported the results of the research process while Chapter 5 presented conclusions and recommendations that arose from the results.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

The purpose of the following research study was to develop an understanding of chief fire officer perspectives on the social justice movement that arose following the death of George Floyd. As discussed in Chapter 1, allied professions, especially law enforcement, observed substantial changes in the way individuals conducted their work because of the social justice movement that arose following the death of George Floyd (Hibert, 2021). On the surface, the movement appears to have had a less prominent role in influencing the fire service; however, this

research sought to explore the role further by examining existing literature on the topic and interviewing chief fire officers to better understand the resulting impacts they have felt within the fire industry.

To understand the existing knowledge more holistically on the topic, a review of the scholarly literature was undertaken. Reviewing the existing literature presented significant challenges in that no scholarly research could be located which directly referenced the topic. Extensive searches utilizing multiple related topics and subtopics across several search engines were employed; however, no “in-field,” or specific fire & EMS-related academic literature could be located regarding the impact of the 2020 social justice movement on the fire service. The literature search was then expanded to focus on “out-field” literature, which is literature from related disciplines. In this case, the search was widened to include allied disciplines that are aligned with the fire and EMS mission, primarily public safety, and health-related fields.

The expanded search field located several articles across a variety of allied disciplines. The articles were reviewed for relevance to the purpose of the study. Literature sources were examined utilizing Calabrese’s Critical Analysis Approach to selecting research for a literature review (Calabrese, 2006). This approach, also known as Approach 1, examines potential research in two phases, first a preliminary appraisal and then a content analysis (Calabrese, 2006).

Sources that fail either the preliminary appraisal or the content analysis are excluded from the literature review. Selection for inclusion in the literature review was based on the applicability of the paper to the purpose of the study, as well as the clarity and relatability of the research results in reference to the fire and EMS discipline. Exclusion criteria included sources that offered little applicability to the fire and EMS discipline or that had results that were

difficult to extrapolate in terms of the study. Sources that failed the preliminary appraisal or content analysis in these areas were excluded from the literature review.

The review and selection process eventually located 10 articles based in allied disciplines to the fire and EMS services. The research results in each article offered direct inferences to the purpose of the following study. Many of the identified sources focused on law enforcement, including articles on personnel turnover, body-worn cameras, social media, and differentiating between the effects of COVID-19 and the 2020 social justice movement. Other allied disciplines included the mental health field and executive leadership of public universities.

This thorough literature review failed to locate in-field research and was forced to rely on out-field sources. This would indicate that social justice is an important research topic within allied public safety professions. However, research on social justice movement impacts remains lacking in the fire and EMS fields.

### **Existing Literature**

With no in-field literature available, the literature review focused on out-field literature with direct relevance to the research study. Among the variety of literature selected for this review, the largest number of articles referenced the law enforcement community. As a result, the following review focuses first on articles referencing law enforcement prior to moving on to other out-field, yet allied, professions.

### **Law Enforcement Alignment**

Perhaps one of the most perplexing aspects of examining the impact of George Floyd's death is the simultaneous impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. George Floyd's death occurred only a few short months into the COVID-19 pandemic, making it difficult to distinguish which impacts can be attributed to the social justice movement and which are related to the pandemic.

This challenge is examined in-depth in “Investigating the Impacts of a Global Pandemic and George Floyd’s Death on Crime and Other Features of Police Work” published in the March 2022 edition of *Justice Quarterly* (White et al, 2022). In this article, the authors examine how law enforcement has been influenced by both COVID-19 and George Floyd’s death. The authors applied a formula to attempt to differentiate between the effects of these two major events and found some success, facilitating the ability to focus on the influence of the social justice movement.

Differentiating between the effects of COVID-19 and George Floyd’s death is critical to the work of this research study. White et al (2022) stated that COVID-19 affected virtually every aspect of law enforcement including citizen contacts, training, and the number of requests for assistance. Research questions in this study were structured in such a manner as to differentiate between the influence of COVID-19 and the influence of social justice within the fire and EMS community.

White et al (2022) accomplished this differentiation through their own research design. Specifically, the White et al. study examined data to assess how crime and other aspects of law enforcement changed from the effects of COVID-19, how crime and other aspects of law enforcement changed from George Floyd’s death, and to what extent the change was influenced by the interaction of the two major events (White et al, 2022). The study examined data beginning 3-years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and extending through the first 10 months of the pandemic, which included 8 months of data following George Floyd’s death (White et al, 2022).

The study found that the pandemic had a significant impact across all aspects of law enforcement (White et al, 2022). While the study was able to isolate independent impacts from

George Floyd's death, those impacts were less significant than the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (White et al, 2022). In particular, the authors hypothesized that the number of violent crimes would increase dramatically, but that result was not observed (White et al, 2022). The authors attributed this to a long-standing culture of procedural justice, or fairness and transparency, within the studied department (White et al, 2022). This result led to a limitation noted in the study, indicating that local conditions, such as community size, culture, and so on, could have a role in the significance of the influences of either, or both, the COVID-19 pandemic, and George Floyd's death (White et al, 2022).

In December 2014, President Barak Obama created the President's Task Force on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policing with the goal of identifying changes within the criminal justice system that could reduce racial disparities (Benet & McMillan, 2021). The task force's work received little attention until the death of George Floyd in May 2020. In the aftermath of George Floyd's death, the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives partnered with the Institute for Polarities of Democracy and the Walden University Center for Social Change to renew this effort through an Anti-Racism Initiative. The initial work of that initiative was detailed in the article "Reimagining Public Safety in the Aftermath of George Floyd" published in the *Journal of Social Change* (Benet & McMillan, 2021).

The Benet & McMillan article described Phase 1 of the Anti-Racism Initiative, which focused on four pillars of law enforcement, including Trust & Legitimacy, Policies & Procedures, Community Policing & Crime Reduction, and Training & Education (Benet & McMillan, 2021). Major themes were identified within each pillar to provide a roadmap to dealing with effects of institutional and structural racism (Benet & McMillan, 2021). Many of

the themes could be applied within the fire and EMS community as well, such as creating a culture of transparency, initiating positive community engagement, developing a broad range of diversity within the workforce, focusing on a community service mentality, developing collaborative partnerships within the community, increasing training on bias and cultural competency, and integrating citizens into training beyond the academy environment (Benet & McMillan, 2021).

Interestingly, two of the themes emerging from Benet and McMillan's (2021) work carry implications for the foundation of the current research paper, recommending support for current evidence-based research through institutes of higher learning, and the development of a national training infrastructure. The Capstone Research Paper element of the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officer Program, as well as the National Fire Academy itself, fit well within the recommendations. It is a benefit that these resources currently exist within the fire and EMS community.

The authors of "Social Identity and Support for Defunding the Police in the Aftermath of George Floyd's Murder", published on *SocArXiv* in May 2022, examined how social identity shaped public attitudes toward defunding the police following the death of George Floyd (Jackson et al, 2022). The authors posited that social identity theory, expressed through identification with specific groups of people, played a dominant role in how citizens defined and regarded calls to defund the police (Jackson et al, 2022). A survey of 1,500 participants found support for this hypothesis while also revealing useful perspectives on the nature of law enforcement and community values (Jackson et al, 2022).

The authors identified the definition of defunding the police as a key element of their investigation (Jackson et al, 2022). People gravitate toward groups that appeal to their self-

identification and adopt the attitudes and perspectives germane to those groups. For the authors, a key perspective among groups was to better understand how they viewed the call to defund the police. The study found a sharp division over what the term meant. One side of the divide was highly supportive of the police, found their enforcement of the law to be fair, and viewed defunding the police as a threat to the existence of the police (Jackson et al, 2022). The other side of the divide was less supportive of the police, questioned the fairness with which the law was enforced across racial lines, and viewed the call to defund the police as a movement toward reform with the goal of restoration of trust in the police (Jackson et al, 2022).

The study determined that group perceptions of police activity could be separated into three broad categories: procedural justice, distributive justice, and bounded authority (Jackson et al, 2022). The authors defined procedural justice as how deeply police interactions and decision-making are based on fairness, mutual respect, providing voice to those without power, and so on (Jackson et al, 2022). The authors described distributive justice as the idea that scarce resources are divided fairly across all groups within the community. Additionally, the authors described bounded authority as the police respecting and working within the lawful limits of their authority (Jackson et al, 2022). How groups perceived each element was found to be a function of their identity and culture.

The work in the Jackson et al. study provides direct relevance to fire and EMS. At the least, the fire and EMS communities are made up of a wide variety of groups which include both conservative and liberal political identities. More broadly, fire and EMS agencies have deep connections with their communities which can be expressed in ways similar to how the study participants perceived the law enforcement community. Operating with fairness and mutual respect in decision-making, fairly providing services across the whole community, and working

within the lawful limits of authority are common concepts within the fire and EMS community. How the perceptions of groups inside and out of the fire and EMS community differ in their perspectives could be an important point of consideration for chief fire officers.

When seeking to build trust within a community, an avenue that law enforcement may use comes in the form of social media. In “Reaching and engaging people: Analyzing tweeting practices of large U.S. police departments pre- and post- the killing of George Floyd” the authors sought to examine the use of one popular social media platform, Twitter (Dong & Wu, 2022). Published on *PLOS ONE* in July 2022, the study examined four months of tweets from 115 large police departments in the months before and following the death of George Floyd (Dong & Wu, 2022). Police use of social media has become more prevalent with about 96% of respondent law enforcement agencies reporting to the International Chiefs of Police that they have a social media account (Dong & Wu, 2022). There was limited research on the benefits and challenges of police use of social media, a knowledge gap that the authors sought to fill.

The study determined that the overall number of law enforcement tweets increased immediately following the death of George Floyd but returned to previous levels one week later (Dong & Wu, 2022). In contrast, citizen interactions with law enforcement tweets increased following the death of George Floyd and remained higher than previous levels through July 2020 (Dong & Wu, 2022). The increase in citizen interaction is particularly relevant because as the number of police tweets increased, the tone of their tweets turned more negative (Dong & Wu, 2022). Using a formula to evaluate words as positive or negative, the authors found that law enforcement tweets were more likely to be negative than positive even before George Floyd’s death and the negativity increased afterward (Dong & Wu, 2022). Using another formula to determine the pleasantness or attractiveness of a sentence or phrase, the authors found that law

enforcement tweets became less pleasant or attractive following the death of George Floyd (Dong & Wu, 2022). The increase in the number of tweets, and in their negativity, occurred simultaneously with the COVID-19 pandemic which increased the overall visibility of and reliance on digital communication such as tweeting, making the tone especially visible.

The study presents helpful considerations for chief fire officers in the use of social media. Most importantly the authors of the research worked to understand the boundaries of acceptable use, as the study made clear that there is no accepted standard defining the responsible and effective use of social media within the public safety arena (Dong & Wu, 2022). Many questions abound regarding ethics, from protecting victim privacy to selective transparency, or releasing carefully curated information designed to shape public opinion to avoid accountability. The ability to release information directly to the public without using the traditional news media carries an inherent risk of selective transparency as a natural tendency to protect and preserve agency image is difficult to eliminate. However, the study authors also made clear the unique benefit of providing timely and accurate messaging in crisis situations can make an agency's social media feed a trusted source of information for the public (Dong & Wu, 2022).

Another means of increasing law enforcement transparency is the use of body-worn cameras to document officers' interactions with citizens and each other. Published in the July 2022 edition of *Policing: An International Journal* "Investigating the prevalence and utility of police body-worn cameras in the George Floyd protests" delves into the use of police body-worn cameras following the death of George Floyd (Gaub et al, 2021). Police body-worn cameras have become common with 50% of all law enforcement agencies, including 80% of large agencies, using body-worn cameras by 2016 (Gaub, 2021).

With the wide-spread use of body-worn cameras, there have been multiple studies into the benefits and challenges of the overall use in standard police work. However, no study had been undertaken regarding the use of police body-worn cameras during large-scale protests, such as those that occurred following the death of George Floyd (Gaub, 2021). The protests that arose following the death of George Floyd offered the first wide-scale protests in which most police officers wore body-worn cameras. To examine the use of police body-worn cameras during the protests, the study authors surveyed 100 law enforcement agencies. Over 75% of the agencies reported protests occurred within their jurisdiction and nearly 80% of those agencies had officers on scene utilizing body-worn cameras (Gaub, 2021). With that data available, the study authors were able to generate discussion of the benefits, challenges, and unique considerations of police body-worn cameras.

There were some thought-provoking points discussed within the Gaub article. First, was the revelation that many civil rights groups opposed the use at first amendment protected demonstrations as they may record citizens exercising their constitutional rights (Gaub, 2021). This presents a parallel consideration that police body-worn cameras may capture actions or conversations that include protected health information. Second, the article described instances of body-worn cameras capturing illegal or unethical actions or conversations by police officers themselves (Gaub, 2021). Body-worn cameras may capture fire and EMS personnel in similar instances. Chief fire officers may need to consider policies addressing body-worn camera recordings that capture protected health information and for instances where recordings capture fire and EMS personnel violating laws and/or policies.

Law enforcement agencies across the nation have dealt with staffing concerns for the past several years, but there was a perception that those concerns rose to crisis level following the

death of George Floyd. In “Elevated Police Turnover following the Summer of George Floyd Protests: A Synthetic Control Study” the authors sought to determine whether the perception was accurate and to better understand police turnover in general (Mourtgos, 2021). The study, published in *Criminology and Public Policy* in February 2022, looked at 5-years of data on retirements, voluntary resignations, and involuntary separations (Mourtgos, 2021). Data analysis indicated retirements remained roughly on par following the death of George Floyd, involuntary separations increased slightly, and voluntary resignations rose by 275% (Mourtgos, 2021).

The study found that retirements, voluntary resignations, and involuntary separations were on a steady upward trajectory throughout the study period, lending credence to the overall staffing concerns (Mourtgos, 2021). However, the sharp increase in voluntary resignations directly coincided with the sudden change in socio-political climate the nation experienced following the death of George Floyd (Mourtgos, 2021). Officers voluntarily resigning cited the loss of job satisfaction as a significant factor in their decision (Mourtgos, 2021). While the study forecasted that voluntary resignations may eventually stabilize near their previous trajectory, there has been a significant loss of incumbent law enforcement officers. The study did not address recruitment but did express that there may be a need to examine the effect on recruiting new police officer candidates (Mourtgos, 2021).

The Mourtgos (2021) study has a significant impact for chief fire officers. The study identified that the loss of an individual police officer could result in costs to the locality of more than \$357,500 (Mourtgos, 2021). A months-long hiring process and the need to complete a basic training academy increase costs and delay the replacement of each officer who leaves an agency. The study cited the inability to respond to calls for service and a reduction in public trust as additional complications arising from the turnover of police officers (Mourtgos, 2021). Fire and

EMS agencies operate under similar conditions and may experience similar complications from elevated turnover. Chief fire officers should consider the causes of and complications resulting from turnover in fire and EMS personnel to maintain a high level of service to the community.

The change in working conditions was cited as a factor in voluntary resignations of law enforcement officers. The willingness of firefighters to serve in changing working conditions was examined by the authors of “Willingness of Firefighting Program Students to Work in Disasters—Turkey” (Kaya et al, 2017). While the study was published in *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine* in February 2018, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and George Floyd’s death, it provides a relevant perspective on the topic. The article does not address social justice but the reasoning of the study participants to work or not work in disasters draws parallels with the reasons why firefighters may or may not want to work in the current social justice climate.

The authors surveyed over 1,100 university students in firefighting or civil defense programs in Turkey (Kaya et al, 2017). The authors posed a series of questions to the students regarding to which types of disasters they were most or least likely to be willing to respond. Surveys indicated that most students were willing to work in common disasters such as building fires, forest fires, and earthquakes (Kaya et al, 2017). Conversely, most students were not willing to work in nuclear disasters or contagious disease disasters (Kaya, 2017). The surveys indicated that students were less willing to work in disasters situations that included “difficult and uncomfortable conditions” (Kaya et al, 2017).

This study presents a controversial topic for chief fire officers, challenging the assumption that firefighters are willing to respond to any incident that may occur. It was interesting to note that one of the disaster types that students were least willing to respond to was a contagious disease disaster, considering the recent challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the study itself does not address social justice or civil unrest, it may be a reasonable conjecture that students may be less willing to respond to such incidents since they bear a similar nature of personal risk to nuclear or contagious disease disasters.

Law enforcement, with a close working relationship to fire and EMS, is a key comparison in assessing the potential influence of the current social justice movement on the fire and EMS community. However, it is not the only allied profession to be a predictor of potential influence on the fire and EMS community. Other allied professions, such as mental health, environmental health, and public education also provide valuable perspectives for chief fire officers.

### **Mental Health Alignment**

The death of George Floyd led to a call for mental health professionals to acknowledge and deal with racism in mental health services (Weine et al, 2020). This call was part of the larger movement to identify and address institutional and structural racism as well as power relationships throughout America's socio-economic and political systems (Weine et al, 2020). In "Justice for George Floyd and a reckoning for global mental health," published in *Global Mental Health*, the authors examined the global mental health field from radical and critical theory perspectives and found that, despite global mental health being grounded in social justice and human rights, the field is not immune from racism and other mental health disparities (Weine et al, 2020). For example, the study identified that many community mental health workers are often low-paid or even volunteers with many being women of racial, ethnic, or religious minorities (Weine et al, 2020). Conversely, professional-level mental health workers are more commonly males from elite groups (Weine et al, 2020).

The study noted that police officers are often the first responders to persons experiencing a mental health crisis, further noting that this is not ideal (Weine et al, 2020). The authors

advocate for the establishment of community health systems with dedicated mental health workers to ensure appropriate access to care for persons in crisis (Weine et al, 2020). One model examined by the authors is a Crisis Intervention Team model pairing mental health workers with law enforcement officers (Weine et al, 2020). The study found that such programs can reduce violence in police encounters as well as suicide attempts while in police custody (Weine et al, 2020).

Chief fire officers should be aware of programs such as the Crisis Intervention Team model within their community. Fire and EMS agencies respond frequently to mental health crises and may interact with these teams. It is also possible that fire and EMS personnel may be asked to participate on such teams. One aspect of the movement to defund the police included shifting funds from law enforcement to mental health to address some of the deficiencies identified within the mental health field (Dholakia & Gilbert, 2022). Fire and EMS agencies may receive these shifting funds and be put into a position to become a primary responder to persons in mental health crisis.

### **Environmental Health Alignment**

Environmental health is another allied discipline experiencing the influence of the current social justice movement. In “COVID-19 as Eco-Pandemic Injustice: Opportunities for Collective and Antiracist Approaches to Environmental Health” Powers et al (2021) focus on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic but also discuss the current social justice movement. Published in the *Journal of Health & Social Behavior*, the article describes structural inequality within environmental health including toxic contamination, infectious disease outcomes, disaster capitalism, and climate change (Powers et al, 2021). The study also describes the synergistic

effects of the intersection of multiple mechanisms of inequality, especially chronic diseases (Powers et al, 2021).

The authors describe the challenges laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic including underfunded public health infrastructure, failed for-profit healthcare, limited global supply chains, and a fragile workforce (Powers et al, 2021). The study identified several challenges through a social justice lens including inadequate housing, residential segregation, and health inequalities (Powers et al, 2021). The study also identified a dramatic increase in health activism following the death of George Floyd, including the recognition of racism as a public health crisis within government and professional associations (Powers et al, 2021). The social justice movement has made visible the racism within environmental and public health, creating a platform for change.

Awareness of structural injustices may assist chief fire officers in assessing needs and service delivery within their communities. Considering the previous discussion of distributive justice, the fair distribution of services across a community, fire and EMS agencies must ensure that services are delivered fairly. Fire and EMS agencies play a key role in the delivery of healthcare within their communities, making a clear understanding structural inequality within environmental health a critical element of effective service delivery.

### **Education Alignment**

The other articles reviewed in this chapter have focused on one aspect or another of the social justice movement and its impacts. In “University Social Responsibility: Challenging Systemic Racism in the Aftermath of George Floyd’s Murder” Meikle and Morris (2022) approach their study in similar form to this study of chief fire officer perspectives. Published in February 2022 in *Administrative Sciences*, the paper examines the responses of university

presidents to the social justice movement and their understanding of the principles of social justice within their universities (Meikle & Morris, 2022). The authors utilize Critical Discourse Analysis to identify and evaluate themes in the communications of 62 university presidents, including 34 public and 28 private universities (Meikle & Morris, 2022). Following the death of George Floyd each university president issued an official letter or statement and these formed the basis of the analysis (Meikle & Morris, 2022).

The 62 universities featured 12 historically black colleges and universities, 7 ivy league universities, and 43 predominantly white institutions. While there were many similarities among all 63 universities, there were some significant differences. For example, all historically black universities and ivy league universities directly referenced George Floyd in their official statements, but only 88% of predominantly white institutions did so (Meikle & Morris, 2022). Five predominantly white institutions failed to acknowledge the existence of systemic racism in their official letter or statements (Meikle & Morris, 2022). Forty-three of the institutions expressed a strong commitment to social justice and all but a few issued a call to action to their faculty, staff, students, and alumni (Meikle & Morris, 2022).

The study went even further to examine official university mission statements, strategic plans, vision statements, core values, and websites. Forty-seven mission statements included a commitment to community engagement or service (Meikle & Morris, 2022). While all the historically black universities included a commitment to diversity in their mission statement, only 43% of ivy league universities and 26% of predominantly white institutions did so (Meikle & Morris, 2022). Only 60 universities had a strategic plan available for review. Fifty-nine of the strategic plans included a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (Meikle & Morris, 2022).

The unique approach of the study, analyzing the communications of the chief executive of each university, is a close parallel to the intent of this study to examine the perspectives of chief fire officers. The use of critical discourse analysis allowed the researchers to read between the lines to understand how committed the universities were in their statements and policies. Chief fire officers should also consider the language used in official statements they make and policies they implement.

### **Synthesis of Existing Literature**

There were 10 out-field sources of literature reviewed in this chapter. These 10 sources represent a diverse range of allied professions to the fire and EMS service. In all cases, there was current and relevant research being conducted into the influence of the current social justice movement. Even where the focus is on the COVID-19 pandemic, widely acknowledged as a major influence itself, the researchers noted the concurrent impact of the social justice movement.

This chapter endeavored to examine literature that was informative on a variety of issues with the potential to impact the fire and EMS community. From social justice reforms to social media use, to making official statements, these studies laid the groundwork to better understand how allied professions are being scrutinized following the death of George Floyd. The synergy of these diverse sources further illustrates the glaring gap in fire and EMS literature where no relevant sources could be located.

The sum of the 10 articles clearly indicates that the social justice movement is influencing change in a variety of disciplines. Recognition of racist policies and practices and other injustices is occurring in each of these disciplines. Considering the close working relationship among the various disciplines and the fire & EMS community, it is not unreasonable

to infer similar policies, practices, and injustices may exist within the fire and EMS community as well. However, the lack of current relevant literature indicates that the fire and EMS community has not yet undertaken the difficult process of self-assessment, looking inward to identify where these policies, practices, and injustices exist and begin the even more difficult process of rectifying them.

### **Summary**

Taken together, the diverse sources in this chapter demonstrate a wide range of research being undertaken in a variety of disciplines following the death of George Floyd. The current social justice movement is influencing change in a variety of ways. The lessons gleaned from the literature reviewed in this chapter will inform the research design and questions to be posed in this study. Chief fire officers may benefit from the perspective gained from the literature reviewed here and gratitude is extended to the many researchers and staff that created it.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

The overarching purpose of the research study was to understand how the current social justice movement influenced change within the fire and EMS community. The study was designed with the intention of learning and understanding the perspectives of individual chief fire officers and their agencies. Semi-structured interviews formed the foundation of the study with guiding questions to prompt thought, which were then followed by careful analysis to create learning and understanding.

### **Research Design**

The design of the study emerged at the very onset of the conceptual process. This took the form of an imagined conversation in which chief fire officers were asked for their thoughts

on why law enforcement has been influenced so heavily by the social justice movement; however, it was quickly discovered that there was little discussion of these impacts within the fire and EMS community. As a result, the concept of the study arose to directly ask chief fire officers this question.

Conducting in-depth interviews with chief fire officers was the foundation of the research study. Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that asking a research participant open-ended questions is a qualitative research approach. There are no numerical data needs underpinning this study, no hypothesis to prove or disprove. There is simply a need to ask and understand. Therefore, both quantitative and mixed methods approaches were considered but ultimately rejected as not appropriate based on the research purpose.

Early in the research design process, three research questions were developed. The first asked in what ways are chief fire officers aware of impacts to the fire service and EMS agencies because of the current social justice movement? The second questioned to what extent have changes within their fire and EMS organization occurred because of the current social justice movement. The third queried what future impacts, if any, could be foreseen for the fire and EMS fields, because of the social justice movement, and what is recommended to address these? As the study evolved, the research questions changed as well, eventually merging into a single broad research question fully aligned with the research topic and study title. This final question, how do chief fire officers perceive the influence of the social justice movement that arose following the death of George Floyd, provides the foundation for the development of research participant interviews and interview questions.

Kostere and Kostere (2021) postulate that writing a quality research question requires a focus on 3 key elements including the topic, the phenomenon under inquiry, and the population

being studied. For the purposes of this study, the topic was the social justice movement that arose following the death of George Floyd. The phenomenon under inquiry was the influence exerted by the social justice movement on the fire and EMS community, and the population being studied was chief fire officers.

Within the qualitative approach there are several research designs that provide a more specific focus within the overall approach. Creswell and Creswell (2018) list five designs and report that other sources count more than twenty potential qualitative designs. A review of Creswell and Creswell (2018) found that none of the five fit the topic and purpose of this study. A wider review of potential designs identified the Generic Qualitative Inquiry as the best fit. Kostere and Kostere (2021) describe Generic Qualitative Inquiry as a means to learn about and understand a phenomenon, perspective, or worldview. It examines topics relevant to real-world issues or situations (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). Generic Qualitative Inquiry provides the design best fitted to discover and understand the perspectives of chief fire officers on a real-world issue such as the influence of the social justice movement.

Kostere and Kostere (2021) provide a 3-pronged test to ensure the applicability of Generic Qualitative Inquiry to a specific research study. First, researchers must ask if they are seeking to better understand an aspect of human experience. Social justice and how it influences people and organizations falls within the scope of human existence. Second, researchers must determine if qualitative procedures will be used within their study. The intent of this study is to conduct direct semi-structured interviews, which is a qualitative procedure. Finally, researchers must assess if their research design comprises a qualitative stance. Kostere and Kostere (2021) describe a qualitative stance as attempting to make sense of lived experiences. Chief fire officer

perspectives reflect upon their lived experiences, thus meeting all three criteria for the use of Generic Qualitative Inquiry in this study.

Generic Qualitative Inquiry does present a significant challenge for researchers in that it carries an inherent risk of a lack of academic rigor (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). Key elements of ensuring academic rigor include focusing on producing purposeful data and meaningful analysis through strict adherence to qualitative procedures (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). Researchers must approach their research design and processes with the intentional elimination of pre-understandings and pre-suppositions, maintaining an open mind to allow data collection and analysis to drive the study results.

At this point, the research approach (qualitative), the research design (generic qualitative inquiry), and the procedure (semi-structured interviews) were established. Kostere and Kostere (2021) describe the next step as selecting a data analysis process. They describe Thematic Analysis as the preferred process for analyzing data collected from interviews, which is appropriate for this study. Kostere and Kostere (2021) describe 3 types of Thematic Analysis, including Inductive, Theoretical, and Constant Comparison. Inductive Thematic Analysis does not attempt to force the data into any pre-existing categories, instead allowing the data itself to drive the analysis (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). There is a strong focus on eliminating any pre-understandings or pre-suppositions regarding the data. The analysis process examines the data from each interview individually, allowing a deeper examination of each interviewee's responses (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). This stands in contrast to the Theoretical Analysis which relies on pre-determined categories or Constant Comparison which compares each new piece of data to that which has already been collected and analyzed (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). With no existing literature on the chosen research topic, it is reasonable to analyze the data with an open mind and

no pre-existing categories, allowing each interview to stand on its own, and letting the data lead the study wherever it may.

### **Population and Sample Size**

Kostere and Kostere (2021) define population as all the people who are eligible to participate in a study. The intent of this study was to interview chief fire officers to understand their perspectives on the social justice movement. The population for this study was chief fire officers in the United States; however, this is a very broad category. The International Association of Fire Chiefs boasts a membership of over 12,000 chief fire officers (International Association of Fire Chiefs [IAFC], 2022), including many categories of chief officers, such as career, volunteer, and combination chief fire officers, rural, urban, and suburban chief fire officers, and 5-bugle chief fire officers, assistant chief fire officers, deputy chief fire officers, battalion chief fire officers, and so on. There were potentially many thousands of chief fire officers in the study population.

While a population of thousands of chief fire officers initially appears overwhelming, such a large number offered an excellent opportunity for collecting unique perspectives. As noted in the literature review, White et al (2022) identified that local conditions such as the size of a community or the culture of its police department had a substantial impact on the influence of the social justice movement. Recognizing that diverse departments experience the influence of the social justice movement in different ways, it was imperative that the population was as diverse as possible to allow the sample to be as diverse as possible.

The sampling strategy was developed to identify and recruit participants from within the study population. The initial step in the sampling strategy was to create a process for selecting a sample. The International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) which conducts, manages, or

supports a variety of fire and EMS research projects, was consulted to facilitate the identification of a sample (IAFC, 2022). Working with the IAFC's Research Program Manager, the population was narrowed from the full 12,000-strong IAFC membership to participants in executive leadership programs (R. Miller, personal communications, November 23, 2022). This group is diverse, well-versed in the subject matter, and already committed to supporting research in the field (R. Miller, personal communications, November 23, 2022). This purposeful sampling strategy narrows the overall population but ensures that participants will have experience in the topic being studied and are willing to describe their experiences (Kostere & Kostere, 2021).

Eighteen chief fire officer graduates of IAFC executive leadership programs received a targeted recruitment request, asking for their participation in this research study. Sixteen sample members responded and agreed to participate in the study. Each sample member was then emailed the Informed Consent Form and a participant demographics table, as shown in Appendix A. Ultimately, ten sample members, eight chief fire officers in the United States and two in Canada, participated in the research process. This relatively small sample size required the participation of each respondent to ensure a valid sample size.

### **Instruments**

Kostere and Kostere (2021) posit that the ultimate goal of a study is to collect data that is “substantial, meaningful, and rich” (p. 26). The survey instrument must be designed in such a way as to draw out the data that will fulfill that goal. For the purposes of this study, there were two instruments developed to help draw out that data.

The first instrument collected essential demographic data. Demographic data was used to support data analysis and to assess the diversity of the sample. Demographic data collected for each interviewee included current position, years in current position, years as an officer in

fire/EMS, total years of fire/EMS experience, highest educational achievement, age, gender, participation in other fire service organizations, and certifications/credentials. Demographic data collected for the interviewee's agency included agency type, agency size, community type, and agency geographic region. These demographic elements provide useful data for comparisons and analysis. Demographic information was collected through a table included on the Informed Consent Form that all members of the sample were required to submit prior to their interview.

The second instrument was an interview protocol. The interview protocol was utilized by the researcher to assist in maintaining the semi-structured nature of the interview. Creswell and Creswell (2018) provide a list of components that should be included in an interview protocol which guided the development of the interview protocol here. The interview protocol included an introduction wherein the researcher and the interviewee had an opportunity to introduce themselves once again, building rapport toward a comfortable and rich conversation.

The protocol provided opening instructions establishing the ground rules for the interview such as how to answer questions, how to respond to prompts, and a reminder that the participant could end the interview at any time, should they desire. It then listed the series of guided interview questions developed for this study and intended to prompt thoughtful discussion from the interviewee. It also included the series of prompts developed for the study to assist in moving the interview along or exploring specific answers provided by the interviewee, as appropriate. Finally, the protocol included closing instructions to the interviewee in following up with the researcher for questions or clarifications. The interview protocol did not include taking notes, as each interview will be recorded and transcribed.

## Research Process

The foundation of the research study was the collection and understanding of the perspectives of chief fire officers. A wide variety of methods for doing so were considered including surveys and focus groups; however, the desired data was sought for the research included the lived experiences of chief fire officers, so surveys were too impersonal and focus groups limited the potential for individual expression. It became apparent that the best way to collect the perspectives of chief fire officers was simply to ask the chiefs themselves through individual interviews.

The decision to individually interview chief fire officers guided the determination of the population and sample. Once the sample size was established at ten members, there was a need to consider how to manage the interviews (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). The intent was to select as diverse a sample as possible, including geographic diversity. This created a potential need to travel for the interviews which posed a significant challenge considering the lack of funding and limited timeframe available for the study. The decision was made to utilize virtual meeting software to conduct the interviews. Virtual meeting software offered a cost-effective solution, avoiding travel and facilitating ease of recording the sessions, while still maintaining a face-to-face live interview. The Zoom platform was selected because it offered these benefits and an existing account was available for the researcher's use (Zoom Video Communications, Inc, 2022).

With the population, sample, data collection technique, and interview setting established, the next step was to determine the style of interview to be utilized. Cohen and Crabtree (2006) list a variety of interview types ranging from formal structured interviews to informal unstructured conversations. A thorough review of the various interview types identified a Semi-

Structured Interview format as the best fit for this research study. Cohen and Crabtree (2006) describe a semi-structured format as a formal interview that utilizes a list of questions and topics to be covered, known as an interview guide, to establish a framework for data collection. However, the semi-structured nature of the interview creates a conversational atmosphere, allowing the researcher to explore some answers or topics more fully than expressed in the interview guide (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). This interview format is particularly useful when there will only be a single interview with each participant, with the interview guide collecting reliable and comparable data while the ability to explore creates opportunities for new perspective and understanding beyond the immediate topic at hand (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

One critical element of the semi-structured interview is the need to build rapport between the interviewer and interviewee (Platt, 2012). Rapport allows the interviewer and interviewee to discover shared or overlapping worlds, with common language and knowledge (Platt, 2012). Rapport provides a feeling of comfort and shared effort, allowing for deeper thought and vulnerability in answering questions rather than perfunctory answers where rapport is poor or non-existent (Platt, 2012). Rapport allows the interviewer and interviewee to become “equal partners in a negotiated dialogue” (Platt, 2012).

As the interview becomes more of a conversation there are important aspects for the interviewer to consider. First, the interview should be conversational, but never just a conversation (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). The interviewer must keep the interview guide at hand and remember that data collection is the foundation of the interview. However, the interviewer should also avoid interrupting the conversational flow as much as possible, facilitating storytelling and free thought from the interviewee and asking questions only where needed to move the interview along or explore an answer more deeply (Kostere & Kostere, 2021).

Maintaining the free-flowing nature of a conversation while still extracting the necessary data points is a challenging process. Roulston (2012) has identified several methods of preparing to meet the challenge. First, interviews should engage in as much practice as possible. This includes both conducting general interviews wherever possible and practicing the specific interview guide for a research study by interviewing other researchers or associates (Roulston, 2012). Second, Roulston (2012) recommends utilizing an “In the Round” technique where the interviewer takes turns filling the roles of interviewer, interviewee, and observer (Roulston, 2012). This technique allows the interviewer to gain full personal experience in how the interview feels for each participant and how it may look from an outside perspective (Roulston, 2012).

Each interview was conducted in a live synchronous session utilizing Zoom virtual meeting software. Each interview was recorded with informed consent from the participant. The setting of the researcher was an office environment. The setting of the interviewee varied and was determined by the interviewee. During the scheduling process interviewees were asked to ensure that they were able to dedicate up to 90 minutes of time to the interview in a setting that minimized distractions and precluded anyone from overhearing the conversation. The interviewer sought to establish a comfortable and collaborative atmosphere in each interview with a relaxed, non-judgmental, and respectful approach (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). Field notes were not taken during the interview to allow the interviewer to remain fully engaged in the conversation throughout the process (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Following the interview, the interviewer utilized a guided reflection process to document elements of the interview that may would not appear in a transcript of the interview, such as gestures, speed & continuity of speech, vocal tone & pitch, eye movement, and use of space (Roulston, 2012).

With the interview format, setting, and atmosphere established, the next step was the development of the interview guide, comprised of the questions to be asked during the interview (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). There were two key considerations for developing interview questions. First, the questions had to be open-ended, generating thought and conversation rather than a simple yes or no answer (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). Second, the interview question had to align with the research question, the research study title, and the topic being studied (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). With these considerations in mind, eight questions were developed for the interview guide. These questions are open-ended and intended to spur discussion while also capturing data elements for later comparison and analysis. The interview questions, as shown in Appendix B, included the following:

1. Describe your understanding of the current social justice movement that arose following the death of George Floyd.
2. Describe your understanding of the influence of the current social justice movement on allied public safety partners such as law enforcement or mental healthcare providers.
3. Describe your understanding of the influence of the current social justice movement on the Fire & EMS service.
4. Where there are differing levels of influence between Fire & EMS and our public safety partners, do you have thoughts on why those differences may be happening?
5. Consider aspects of the Fire & EMS service that are experiencing little or no influence from the current social justice movement and explain why you believe that may be happening.
6. Discuss where, in the future, the Fire & EMS service may experience social justice influences.

7. Discuss areas in which the Fire & EMS service could improve culture, practices, or policies to incorporate the ideals of the current social justice movement.
8. Explore any additional thoughts or considerations you may have regarding the current social justice movement and the Fire & EMS service.

It is critical to test the interview questions to ensure their validity (Roulston, 2012). In qualitative interviews, validity refers to a question's ability to draw out a meaningful answer rich in detail that will benefit data analysis (Roulston, 2012). The process of establishing validity, known as a pilot, involves testing the interview questions with experts in the field being studied (Platt, 2012). In this case, the pilot tested the interview questions with three experts, including two chief fire officers and one doctoral-degreed social science researcher. None of the individuals piloting the interview questions were participants in the study sample. Pilot participants provided feedback on the design, wording, and outcomes of the interview questions. The feedback indicated that the interview questions were valid in their goal of drawing out meaningful answers that are rich in detail.

In addition to the interview guide questions, Kostere and Kostere (2021) provide a series of "probing and clarifying questions" researchers may utilize during the interview (p. 36). These questions are developed to provide impartial prompting for deeper exploration of specific answers or topics that arise during the interview (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). The questions included in the interview guide for this study are:

- That's interesting. Can you tell me more about...?
- What did that mean to you?
- How did you handle that...?
- What happened after...?

- How was that issue/situation/problem resolved?
- How did that make you feel?
- Can you give me an example of...?

Kostere and Kostere (2021) explain the goal of a successful data analysis as being “I understand how the researcher came up with the results and the results make sense. Now I truly understand the experience of ...” (p. 6). They further explain that data must be analyzed through lens of the research question, not through the guiding interview questions (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). Finally, they advise researchers to approach data analysis like a television detective by not developing a theory until adequate data has been collected (Kostere & Kostere, 2021).

Kostere and Kostere (2021) have identified Thematic Analysis as the focus of data analysis for the generic qualitative approach research design. Thematic analysis searches across collected data to identify patterns of meaning (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). Within the thematic analysis framework there is an additional level of analysis with three potential formats including inductive analysis, theoretical analysis, and thematic analysis with constant comparison (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). Theoretical analysis approaches the analysis with pre-determined categories and thematic analysis with constant comparison analyzes the data immediately following each interview, combining, and comparing it to that already collected (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). Both approaches apply a level of pre-understanding to the data collection and analysis. Inductive analysis was selected because in this format data analysis begins only after all data is collected, and the data from each participant is examined individually (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). This approach allows analysis to occur without the use of pre-existing categories or comparing one participant’s interview against another, providing the purest understanding of each participant’s perspective.

Within the framework of inductive analysis, the researcher will work to identify themes through coding of the data. Coding may be conducted line-by-line or incident-by-incident (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). For this study, incident-by-incident coding was selected as it breaks down the data into a couple sentences up to a full paragraph if they fall into the same theme. Line-by-line coding looks at each sentence individually, which is unnecessary here as the nature of the interview guide should facilitate similar themes across multiple sentences or a paragraph (Kostere & Kostere, 2021).

Inductive analysis is carried out through a specific step by step process as put forward by Kostere and Kostere (2021):

1. Gather all data collected from the first participant and review it for familiarity and to highlight any portion that stands out as meaningful.
2. Review the highlighted data and compare it to the research question to determine if it is directly related to the research question.
3. Set aside, but retain, any material not directly related to the research question as it may be re-evaluated or used in other ways later.
4. Data found to be directly related to the research question are labeled “meaning units”, which are typically a direct quote from a participant’s answer. Each meaning unit is assigned a code.
5. Create groupings of coded meaning units that are related. This begins the process of identifying patterns within the data.
6. As each pattern is identified, the relevant coded meaning units are listed under the pattern. Review the direct quotes within each meaning unit to make sure that the coding and pattern grouping make sense.

7. Summarize each pattern with supporting quotes from the interview, write a brief synopsis of the pattern and its relationship to the research question.
8. Once coding is complete for the first participant's data, examine all patterns together to identify emerging themes. Combine the related patterns under each theme.
9. Arrange the themes and their underlying patterns, ensuring that each pattern is supported by direct quotes from the participant.
10. Develop a detailed analysis of the scope and substance of each theme.
11. This same process is repeated for each individual participant's data.
12. Once data analysis for all participants is complete, themes and patterns are combined into a composite synthesis looking for broad meanings and implications related to the research question.

At this point, the researcher should consider an additional step that will assist in validating the results of the data analysis. Known as member checking, the researcher connects again with each participant, sharing the results of the data analysis and asking for the participant's feedback (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). Any feedback that a participant provides serves as more data to support the study. Member checking aids with ensuring reliability of the data, in addition to providing valuable insight into the data analysis and results of this study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

It is recognized by the researcher that the social justice movement incorporates a wide variety of elements, and it has the potential to elicit a wide range of responses. In accordance with the National Fire Academy's Human Dignity Statement (National Fire Academy, 2021), the viewpoints of others are acknowledged and treated with sensitivity. Not only is diversity appreciated, but the sharing of "differing perspectives, experiences, and ideas" is essential to the

learning at the heart of this study (National Fire Academy, 2021, p. 8). These positions were communicated to interviewees in the interview protocol, along with the intention of mutual respect and non-judgment.

The Executive Fire Officer program utilizes the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA) as the guide for professional writing, citations, and references (National Fire Academy, 2021). The APA requests that researchers following their standards for writing and publishing also abide by their ethical standards (American Psychological Association, 2020). The APA spells out their ethical standards in their Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (American Psychological Association [APA], 2017).

The APA provides specific ethical practices for live interviews of study participants. The APA (2017) requires that materials utilized to recruit study participants must explain the purpose of the study and must describe what will be expected of study participants. Informed consent documents must identify the information that will be collected, how it will be used, and how it will be stored (APA, 2017). Participants must be notified in advance if interviews will be recorded (APA, 2017). Finally, researchers must develop a plan for maintaining confidentiality and ensuring privacy protections are in place (APA, 2017).

Perhaps the most critical aspect of ethical researcher behavior is assuring the confidentiality of the participants and the privacy of their interview responses. Kostere and Kostere (2021) describe a series of steps, layering multiple levels of protection, that should be taken to ensure the confidentiality of study participants. Specific protections were developed for the study, layering in protections as appropriate to the online interviews forming the foundation of this research. First, all email communications with the study participants were encrypted to prevent unauthorized access. Second, all digital files and folders associated with the study were

password-protected and stored only in the researcher's private drive. This includes recordings of each interview. Third, all hard-copy materials were stored and transported only under the direct supervision of the researcher. Fourth, hard copies were scanned into digital files and the original hard copies were destroyed by shredding. This includes the transcription of each recorded interview. Fifth, the researcher utilized features of the online meeting software to password-protect the online meeting for the interview and to establish an online waiting room where any person seeking access to the interview could be vetted by the researcher before being allowed access into the interview room. Finally, the researcher reinforced with the interviewee the importance of their own steps to ensure their confidentiality. This includes choosing their setting for the interview, such as a space that allows for private conversation that cannot be overheard and where they will not be interrupted for the period of the interview. These multiple layers of protection provide confidentiality throughout the research process.

Although the population of chief fire officers appears large, the fire/EMS community is relatively small and there are many inter-connections through fire & EMS organizations, conferences, publications, and similar activities. This inter-connectedness creates the potential for readers to identify interviewees in the research results, through geographic location, storytelling, manner of speaking, or some other unique aspect of the interviewee. Known as deductive disclosure, Kaiser (2012) states that this breach in confidentiality occurs when readers or other researchers can deduce an interviewee's identity from specific data collected during their interview and published in the study findings. Kaiser (2012) goes further to posit that no matter how beneficial, no research result should be reported that could be used to identify a study participant. The researcher should consider their audience in assessing how best to ensure confidentiality such as changing names, locations, or other details that protect identities while

still allowing presentation of results (Kaiser, 2012). A key consideration of ensuring the confidentiality of research results is the member check. During the member check each participant can assess whether the results create concerns for their confidentiality (Kaiser, 2012). Participant feedback during the member check process guides the researcher in further strengthening the confidentiality of research results.

### **Summary**

This qualitative study utilized generic qualitative inquiry to conduct personal interviews of chief fire officers. Ten chief fire officer participants were selected by responding to a targeted email recruitment. Interviews were conducted via virtual meeting software, and each took place in one sitting. The interviews relied on a semi-structured format to guide the participants through a series of open-ended questions which were answered in a conversational manner with prompts and redirects where appropriate. Each interview was recorded and transcribed, and field notes were documented following the completion of each session. Data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis approach and an inductive analysis framework. Incident-by-incident coding allowed for a thorough examination of each participant's interview responses and the development of both individual and overarching themes and patterns of meaning, otherwise known as subthemes. Member checking was used to ensure validity of the results. The analysis of the themes and subthemes provides the foundation for Chapter 4: Study Results.

## **CHAPTER 4: STUDY RESULTS**

### **Introduction – Demographics of the Participants**

Participant recruitment outreach was made to 18 chief fire officers. Sixteen chief fire officers initially agreed to participate in the study, including eleven chief fire officers from within the United States and five from Canada. Ultimately eight chief fire officers in the United

States and two chief fire officers from Canada completed interviews as part of the research process. Kostere and Kostere (2021) recommend a sample size of eight to fifteen participants for individual interviews within the Generic Qualitative Inquiry research design. With only two Canadian chief fire officers participating, research results specific to Canada, such as legislative or societal politics were excluded from research results. All discussions of legislative or societal politics refer strictly to the United States.

All study participants were members of the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) and graduates of an IAFC executive leadership program. All study participants were members of at least one other national-level Fire & EMS Service organization and held at least one credential or designation from a national-level Fire & EMS Service organization.

Altogether, the study participants represented over 6,500 US firefighters and nearly 2,000 Canadian firefighters.

### **Confidentiality**

The study consisted of live interviews with study participants via virtual meeting software. The interview questions sought to draw out the lived experiences of study participants. All study participants reported personally experiencing or witnessing episodes of harassment, discrimination, and bias. These intensely emotional experiences prompted the reevaluation of confidentiality measures within the study, as the need to protect study participants from further harm was readily apparent. Descriptions of the population and sample, as well as the demographics data in Table 1, were revised to reduce the risk of deductive disclosure, which occurs when readers could determine the identity of study participants through the reporting of research results (Kaiser, 2012). Specific demographic information and some participant quotes were excluded or distilled to a level which prevents harm or deductive disclosure.

**Table 1***Study Participant Demographics*

Demographics	Participant Results
Department Types	All Career (7) Career/Volunteer Combination (3)
Ranks Represented	Fire Chief Assistant Chief Deputy Chief Battalion Chief
Years at Chief Rank	Longest is 30 Years Shortest is 2 Years
Years of Service	40+ Year (2) 30-40 Years (2) 20-30 Years (6)
Age Range	Oldest is 65 Youngest is 45
Higher Education Level	Undergraduate Degree Graduate Certificate Graduate Degree
Fire Service Credentials Represented	Executive Fire Officer Center for Public Safety Excellence (CPSE) Chief Fire Officer CPSE Chief Training Officer CPSE Fire Marshal CPSE Fire Officer Member, Institute of Fire Engineers (MIFireE) Nationally Registered Paramedic Certified Emergency Manager Certified Public Manager
Fire Service Organizations Represented	International Association of Fire Chiefs International Society of Fire Service Instructors International Association of Arson Investigators Center for Public Safety Excellence International Association of Fire Fighters National Fire Protection Association Institution of Fire Engineers, USA Branch National Registry of Emergency Medical Technicians International Association of Emergency Managers

**Research Results**

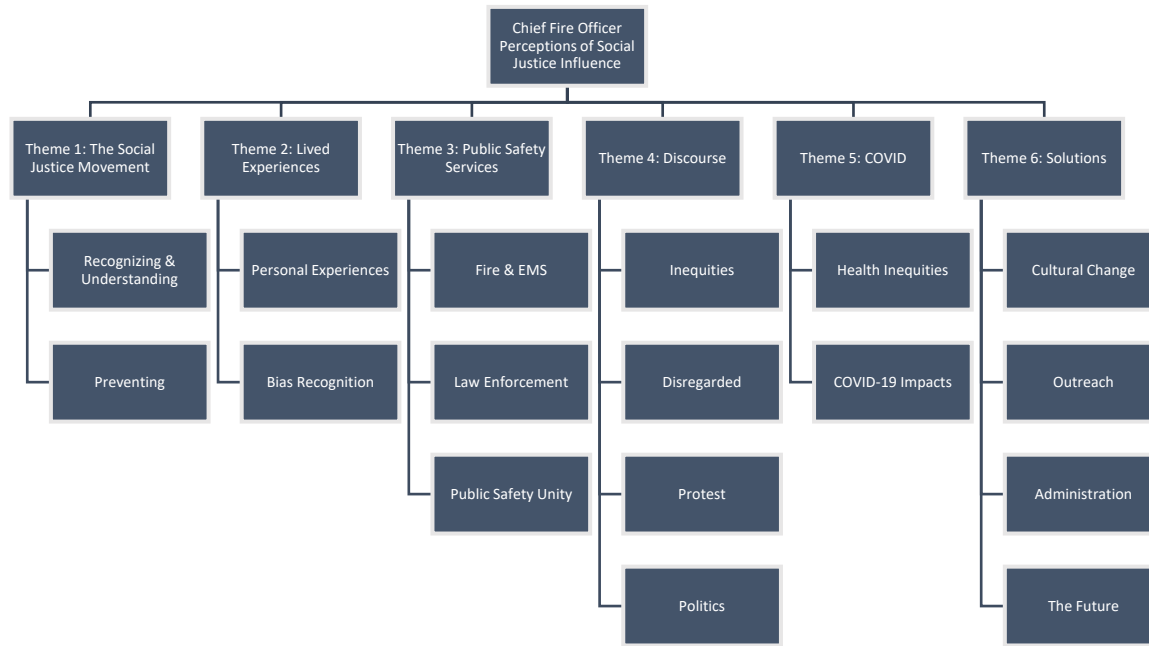
Study participants engaged in live interviews via a virtual meeting platform. Interviews ranged from 38 minutes to 87 minutes, totaling nearly 10.5 hours. All interviews were recorded

and transcribed. Each written transcript was then coded for analysis. Coding began with an Inductive Analysis process, described by Kostere and Kostere (2021). This process does not utilize pre-existing categories, allowing the data to guide the researcher. First, an Incident-by-Incident Analysis process is used to highlight data in multiple related sentences. Second, related data was assembled into meaning units supported by direct quotes from the participants. Third, coded meaning units were then collected into patterns of meaning or subthemes, indicating connected behaviors or experiences. Finally, the subthemes were evaluated to identify themes relevant to the research question. The results of the Inductive Analysis are reported here while the interpretation of the meanings and implications of the codes, subthemes, and themes will be presented in Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations.

The Inductive Analysis process analyzed collected data for relevance in answering the research question “How do chief fire officers perceive the influence of the social justice movement that arose following the death of George Floyd?” Analysis of all interview transcripts identified 48 coded meaning units, 17 subthemes, and 6 themes as relevant to answering the research question. Detailed narratives, participant quotes, and figures are provided to support the analysis and illustrate the development of research results.

**Figure 1**

*Themes and Subthemes*

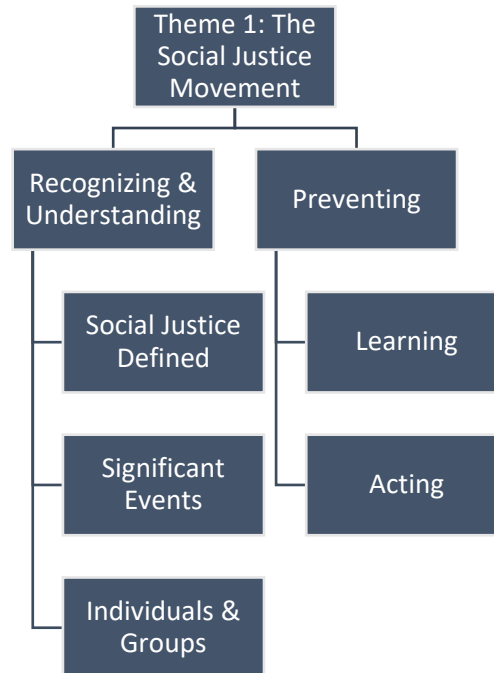


**Theme 1: The Social Justice Movement**

Theme 1 encompasses two subthemes and five coded meaning units. This theme focused on the participants’ perceptions of the social justice movement. Most data coded to this theme was derived from participant responses to Interview Question 1, describe your understanding of the current social justice movement that arose following the death of George Floyd.

## Figure 2

### *Theme 1: The Social Justice Movement*



### ***Subtheme: Recognizing & Understanding***

Participants provided a wide range of responses defining social justice, describing significant events in the movement for social justice, and identifying important groups and individuals within the movement. These responses were grouped into three coded meaning units: Social Justice Defined, Significant Events, and Individuals & Groups. These three coded meaning units were then grouped into the subtheme, “Recognizing & Understanding,” as they relate to recognizing key elements of the social justice movement and understanding the role they play in the movement.

Participants defined the social justice movement in a variety of ways. A common theme among all definitions was the effort to achieve justice, although the exact nature of justice and for whom it was necessary varied among the participants. All participants identified racial equity

as the underlying theme of the social justice movement, but participant responses also included LGBTQ+ equity, healthcare equity, social empathy, and an overall effort to find harmony among all people. One participant summarized that “we can talk about race, but it’s much bigger than that.”

Data within the Significant Events coded meaning unit include a wide range of events both before and after the death of George Floyd. Participants described the civil rights marches of the 1960’s and “frustration similar to the Watts riots” as foundational events in the rise of the social justice movement. Participants also identified racial and economic disparities that were recognized in national disasters, “we’ve seen that through Katrina” and the healthcare disparities exposed when “COVID ripped the scab off the all the inequities that people of color and under-represented and marginalized groups face.”

In identifying influential individuals and groups, participants discussed the impact of deaths that shocked the national conscience including those of Dr. Martin Luther King, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Elijah McClain as well as the beatings Rodney King and most recently Tyre Nichols in Memphis (City of Memphis, 2023). One participant stated, “I really feel that Trayvon is still resonating with a lot of people and communities.” Another explained that “we saw it happen with Eric Garner.” Still another described the public scrutiny on law enforcement resulting from the death of Elijah McClain and how “fire and EMS kind of rode under the radar” until his death. Within fire & EMS, the “struggle” endured by Firefighter/Paramedic Nicole Mittendorf, was highlighted as focusing attention on the bullying and harassment that eventually led to her suicide (Nicol, 2016). George Floyd’s death was a common thread among all responses, with one participant describing George Floyd’s death as a “powder keg to really ignite the movement of equity and equality”.

### ***Subtheme: Preventing***

In discussing their perceptions of the social justice movement, many participants offered thoughts on preventing future violent incidents, such as beatings, riots, and deaths. Those thoughts were grouped into two coded meaning units, Learning and Acting, which were organized into the subtheme Preventing.

Participants discussed that racial injustices date back hundreds of years, with one participant commenting that the fight for social justice “has always been there.” A common thread was that each significant event in the social justice movement provides an opportunity for learning, to bridge gaps and eliminate divisions. One participant summed up that “there’s an opportunity for people to evolve and learn.”

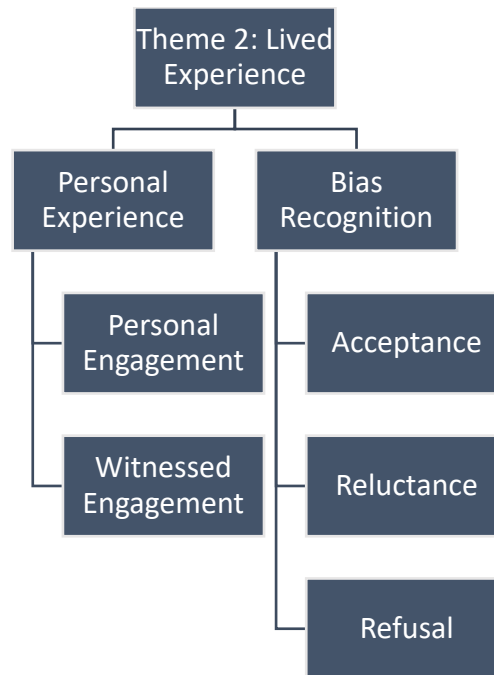
Together with learning was the need to act. Participants indicated that it is imperative to act to prevent further loss of life. A common thread was the identification of what seems to be the increased frequency with which violent interactions are occurring, with one participant commented “Did we not notice it or is it happening more and more?” Participants also discussed a variety of events exposing the need for social justice in the fire service and the obligation of fire service leaders to take action to prevent future such events. Specific actions are discussed as solutions in Theme 6.

### **Theme 2: Lived Experience**

Theme 2 is composed of two subthemes and five coded meaning units. This theme encompasses the lived experiences expressed by interview participants. The diversity of the sample was reflected in the diverse lived experiences they shared in the interview process. Each participant expressed deep connections with social justice and provided valuable data in understanding their experiences and in answering the research question.

**Figure 3**

*Theme 2: Lived Experience*



***Subtheme: Personal Experience***

Data supporting the Personal Experience subtheme presented the most challenging results of the study. The personal experiences of the participants, whether through personal engagement or witnessed engagement, were intensely emotional. Participants described experiencing or directly witnessing acts of intolerance such as hostility, discrimination, and harassment. Participants related lasting impacts from these experiences with one participant describing the experience as “completely awful”, explaining that “we don’t understand it, but it’s happening” and that “it’s happening to our people.” These quotes represent generalizations of the deeply personal data collected within this coded meaning unit. Numerous other participant quotes were excluded from the results reported here to prevent further harm and to ensure participant confidentiality.

These intensely emotional experiences prompted the reevaluation of confidentiality measures within the study, as the need to protect study participants from further harm was imperative. Descriptions of the population and sample, as well as the demographics table were revised to reduce the risk of deductive disclosure. Some data was excluded while in other cases the level of specificity in descriptions was reduced, generalizing the data to enhance confidentiality.

The Personal Experience subtheme encompasses two coded meaning units. The Personal Engagement coded meaning unit describes engagement directed at the participant. The Witnessed Engagement coded meaning unit describes engagement directed at others but witnessed by the participant. Both personal engagement and witnessed engagement elicited strong emotional responses among participants.

Personal Engagement data included descriptions of words and acts directed at participants. These experiences included hostility against participants for stances in support of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts as well as for simply being members of under-represented groups within the Fire & EMS Service. Some participants related blatant acts of hostility that left long-standing emotional trauma. To prevent further harm, those acts of hostility will not be described here.

Participants described witnessing acts of hostility, discrimination, and harassment by members of the Fire & EMS Service. Some of these acts were directed at members of the Fire & EMS Service while others were directed at members of the community. In all cases, the participant was present and directly witnessed the act, again leaving long-standing emotional trauma in some cases. To prevent further harm, these acts will not be described here.

Conveying the emotional weight of both personal and witnessed acts, while attempting to not cause additional harm, phrases utilized by the participants include “that was not fair”, it’s “very disheartening right now”, “I was ashamed”, “it was a surprise”, I was just “stunned by it you know”, “I have never been more stressed in my whole time” as a firefighter, and I was “thrown off a little bit with a few members of my organization.” Participants drew personal connection in many instances, such as “coming from a marginalized group myself”, “having experienced second class citizenship and been ignored”, and “I’ve been dealing with that stuff all my life.” While these perceptions were resoundingly negative for the participants, one participant summed up the positive perceptions of all participants in trying to move forward by stating that “in my little piece of the world, I am an advocate and try to speak on that and be engaged in that.”

### ***Subtheme: Bias Recognition***

Participants described a wide variety of experiences with bias recognition, both educational programs and through lived experiences. Participants described strong responses to bias recognition among members of the Fire & EMS Service, with some members expressing Acceptance, other Reluctance, and a few with outright Refusal. These perceptions were grouped into corresponding coded meaning units.

Participants described that some members were acceptant of recognizing their own biases. Participants perceived that “to mitigate your biases you have to understand them.” This requires introspection and acceptance of your own biases, as one participant noted, “I do feel that people need to take a step back and understand what is going on within themselves.” One participant described their acceptance of recognition of their own bias as “I understand that privilege” and I “recognize that some people may not have the same privilege.”

Participants described the reluctance of some members to come to terms with their own biases, with one participant relating a question from a reluctant member as “what difference does it make?” That participant described the questioning member as sitting on assessment panels for hiring and promotional opportunities. Another participant related a story in which a male firefighter regularly engaged in “locker room talk” and treated the firehouse as a “frat environment” until their wife was hired onto the department and faced harassment and discrimination. The male firefighter came to understand the impact of their actions and apologized to the female members of the department. Another participant described attending training on disparities in the management of pain in people of color. A white male member initially refused to accept the lesson, stating that they treated all patients the same way. However, when presented with data proving the disparity existed within their own department, the member reluctantly accepted the reality of disparate treatment.

Participants noted that even after bias recognition opportunities, a few fire & EMS members refuse to accept that they have biases. One participant described a bias recognition training session with “people screaming” and “slamming the table” in anger. Another described a bias recognition training participant as angrily stating “this is just made-up nonsense, it’s all political correctness and critical race theory.” Participants described these and similar members as continuing “to look down upon individuals in those situations and refusing to come to terms with the fact that those people didn’t put themselves there.”

Participants acknowledged that “it’s tough for an individual to recognize what they are doing is wrong and to realize the hurt it causes.” Participants recognized that bias could exist on incidents in “the way someone dresses or maybe in the fact that their property or neighborhood is blighted.” Participants described the need to recognize the impact of a “lack of social services,

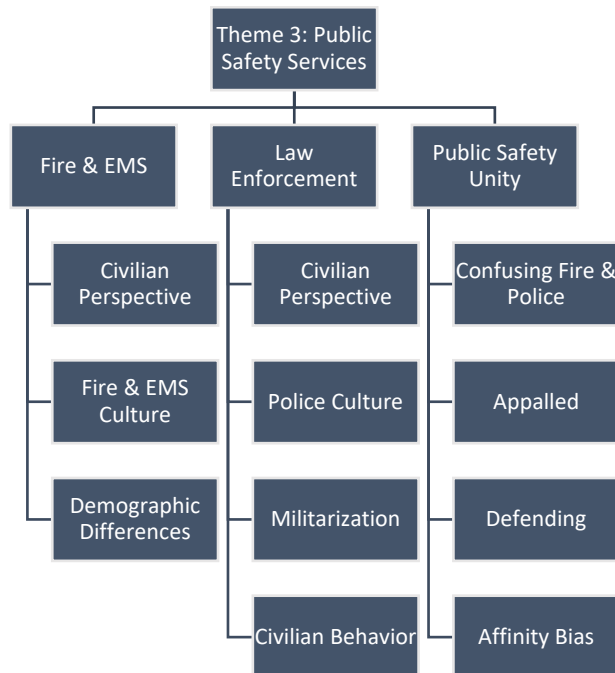
lack of education, racist policies, and racist systems” in contributing to how some people are viewed. One participant described admonishing a responder, “imagine what they feel when you laugh and giggle.” One participant summed up bias recognition in stating “I think most of us don’t like to really look at that ugly side of ourselves or our profession but there’s value in it, even if it’s uncomfortable, that becomes your growth zone.”

**Theme 3: Public Safety Services**

Theme 3 includes three subthemes and eleven coded meaning units with data from all interview questions. This theme focuses on the participants’ perceptions of the Fire & EMS and Law Enforcement services. A third subtheme, Public Safety Unity, emerged over the course of each interview which focuses on the intersection of Fire & EMS and Law Enforcement services.

**Figure 4**

*Theme 3: Public Safety Services*



### ***Subtheme: Fire & EMS***

Common elements emerged across all interviews regarding the Fire & EMS Service as a whole. These elements were grouped into three coded meaning units: Civilian Perspective, Fire & EMS Service Culture, and Demographic Differences. Each coded meaning unit provides a unique perspective on how the chief fire officers viewed and understood elements of the Fire & EMS Service.

The Civilian Perspective coded meaning unit refers to the participants' understanding of how civilians perceive the Fire & EMS Service. One participant effectively summarized the reporting of all other participants in stating "The people in our community love us and respect us and they have trust and a great perception of us." This perception was further reinforced by a participant describing how citizens have donated land and materials for the construction of fire stations. The goodwill and commitment to public safety behind these generous donations demonstrates the high regard citizens hold for the mission of the Fire & EMS Service. However, all participants also agreed that this positive community perception could be shaken or even turned negative if the Fire & EMS Service fails to embrace the ideals of the social justice movement. Participants described Fire & EMS as "riding the coattails of goodwill" established by previous generations and that the Fire & EMS Service continues to ride "under the radar" of public scrutiny. One participant stated that "we get a free ride until we do something we shouldn't do." Participants widely agreed that the Fire & EMS Service's role as "fixers" and "problem solvers" in the community generate a positive perception and that a focus on "doing the right thing" will maintain the positive perception into the future.

Fire & EMS Service Culture, as used in this study, refers to the norms, social customs, and group behaviors of the members of the Fire & EMS Service. All interview participants

discussed the culture of the Fire & EMS Service at length. This coded meaning unit had the most data assigned to it of any coded meaning unit in the study, demonstrating the significant role culture plays in perceiving the influence of social justice. Data within this coded meaning unit was widely varied, including both positive and negative perceptions of the Fire & EMS service culture.

Many participants discussed the uniqueness of the Fire & EMS Service culture. One participant described it as “more like being at home than being at work”. The participant explained that this means “living together for long periods of time and doing things that are common at home, not at work: cleaning, cooking, exercising, showering, eating together around the dinner table, listening to music, watching movies, and sleeping.” The participant further explained that “We do all this while also dealing with different ages, genders, backgrounds, cultures, and so on and in the environment of occupational trauma.” This unique culture and the stressful environment in which it occurs form a foundation for perceptions of the Fire & EMS Service culture.

Participants described the Fire Service Culture as resistant to social progress, particularly social justice. “Entrenched” was a common term among participants in describing the Fire & EMS Service culture. One participant described this as “We don’t want change and we don’t want to keep things the way they are.” Participants discussed the ways in which resistance to change creates interpersonal conflict within the fire station environment. Many participants described the behavior of groups and individuals when differences exist without acceptance. Participants described this as a group excluding certain individuals from the group such as not including the individual in on dinner, or as an individual self-excluding from the group such as

spending all day alone in the bunkroom or apparatus bay. This group and individual behavior were viewed as negative and even described as “toxic”.

Some participants identified insubordination and a lack of accountability by mid- to upper-level chiefs as a significant obstacle to social justice. Participants described these chiefs as wanting to “run their district like it’s their own department”. These chiefs refuse to accept progress as it is pushed down from the Fire Chief or pushed up from new hires. Instead, they hold on tightly to the culture, policies, and practices that were in place when they came into the Fire & EMS Service, actively resisting new ways of thinking and acting.

Many participants identified a similar refrain among newer members of the fire service regarding the provision of emergency medical services. One participant noted that their department has provided EMS transport service for over 20 years but that they still see many newer members coming on to their department who dislike EMS and prefer to only fight fires. When these members find themselves spending most of their time on low-acuity EMS runs, their attitude sours and it becomes apparent in the slower response to EMS runs than fire runs and in poor patient care because the member does not want to be assigned to the ambulance. As this attitude is common among even the newest members of the Fire & EMS Service, participants attributed this to the entrenched culture which continues to elevate firefighting above providing medical care, despite the high proportion of EMS runs to fire runs in their departments.

Participants described a wide variety of holdover policies, practices, and perceptions that continue to pervade the modern Fire & EMS Service. For example, multiple participants described the lack of character assessment in hiring and promotional decisions. Participants stated that a focus on objective performance measures excludes more subjective aspects of character from consideration. One participant stated that the practice of focusing only on

objective performance measures has allowed “bullies, toxic attitudes, sexists, racists, and homophobes to be hired or promoted.” Another participant described how the Fire & EMS Service trains officers as mentors not coaches. The participant states that this practice helps to marginalize the differences between people as mentors follow the philosophy of “I will teach you what I did to succeed” rather than a coaching philosophy of “I will teach you what you need to know based on your skills and your strengths.” Multiple participants described the perception of incompetence among under-represented groups, particularly female firefighters. A common point of discussion was the continuing perception that female firefighters are less physically capable than male firefighters, including a female firefighter being unable to rescue a male firefighter from a fire. One participant stated, “Show me the line of duty death caused by a female too weak to pull someone out of a burning building.” The participant further explained that despite a lack of a record of this ever happening, the perception still exists and is frequently cited within their own department.

While much of the data points in this coded meaning unit is perceived as negative, all participants discussed the mission of the Fire & EMS Service as being positive, with the descriptors “heroes and saviors” applied by multiple participants. One participant felt it important to point out that the Fire & EMS Service “is still a profession that people can be proud of.” All participants described a sense of service or having a servant leader mindset as a positive aspect of the Fire & EMS Service and its role in the community.

Participants acknowledged that perceptions of the social justice movement and the impact of its influence vary widely within the Fire & EMS Service, data which was grouped under the Demographic Differences coded meaning unit. The most common demographic difference cited was the in the make-up of the community including urban, suburban, and rural. One

demographic difference cited by many of the participants was in the assignment of personnel within a fire & EMS agency. For example, firefighters who worked in dense urban portions of a fire department's coverage area may recognize more influence from the social justice movement than firefighters assigned to more sparsely populated rural portions of the same fire department's coverage area. One participant also described the differing social justice influences among firefighters who staff ambulances handling low-acuity EMS runs versus firefighters who only staff fire apparatus that does not respond to EMS runs.

A major aspect of demographic differences discussed by all participants is the wide diversity of the fire service, not necessarily in terms of race or gender, but in all aspects of diversity. Participants described demographic differences such as background, culture, age, physical condition, education level, career goals, and so on. One participant noted that people with "different backgrounds, different experiences" represent a level of diversity in every agency. Several participants discussed the differing norms and social customs among the different generations now working in the Fire & EMS Service. One participant noted the perception that older generations historically fulfilled their calling for service as a volunteer in fire & EMS while newer generations are more often starting out as a new hire in a career fire & EMS agency.

### ***Subtheme: Law Enforcement***

The Law Enforcement subtheme encompasses four coded meaning units, including Civilian Perspective, Police Culture, Militarization, and Civilian Behavior. The data assigned within this subtheme is focused on the perception of the chief fire officer participants regarding the Law Enforcement Service. Four of the participants reported working in law enforcement roles in the past, such as a fire investigator or code enforcement officer. No participants reporting

holding current law enforcement roles and none reported previous employment as a law enforcement officer outside the Fire & EMS Service.

***Subtheme: Civilian Perspective***

All participants discussed at length their understanding of civilian perceptions of the Law Enforcement Service. One participant best summarized this perception in stating that law enforcement officers “get a bad rap because they have to enforce the law.” All participants discussed that, in the past, law enforcement officers were regarded respectfully and appreciated within communities like teachers or ministers. One participant pointed out that in their community, law enforcement officers rescue more people from fires than their firefighters do. However, all participants also discussed that as society has evolved, communities have come to “expect too much from the police.” Law enforcement officers must “come into a bad situation and try to stop bad behavior.” Participants described that bad behaviors may include domestic situations or mental health crises which officers may not be prepared to handle, resulting in poor outcomes or unjustified applications of force. Extensive publicity of the poor outcomes or unjustified applications of force have reduced regard for law enforcement in many communities. Participants described a profound loss of trust for law enforcement within their communities. The loss of respect for law enforcement is illustrated in the lack of new applicants for law enforcement agencies despite high pay, substantial benefit packages, and extensive hiring bonuses. One participant stated that within their community “the police department tests new applicants every month but can’t give the job away.”

***Subtheme: Police Culture***

Within the Police Culture coded meaning unit there were two common threads among all participants. First, that police culture stems from the perception that law enforcement officers

“have to watch out for their own lives, somebody is always trying to hurt them.” Second, is that law enforcement officers approach incident management “from a command-and-control mindset.” Participants described that law enforcement officers perceive danger when interacting with members of the public and quickly establish their authority over the scene and control of any potential threats as a means of protecting themselves. Participants described how the command-and-control mindset is in direct conflict with the culture of newer generations to question authority and demand to know the “why” behind police orders. One participant discussed how this conflict escalates further when law enforcement officers ignore the pleas of suspects or bystanders and act with the mentality of “It’s not my responsibility to adjudicate, I don’t care if you’re innocent or guilty, you met my burden of proof, so you’re going to jail regardless” of the consequences to the person or community.

The command-and-control mindset is further compounded by the common law enforcement practice of “sending the youngest and least experienced officers to deal with critical issues”, as was best described by one of the participants. All participants discussed this common law enforcement practice, while one participant best summarized the concern of having the least experienced officers arriving alone and with “very little information and a short window of opportunity to deescalate and peacefully handle the situation.” Participants perceived this practice as a significant challenge to successfully executing law enforcement’s mission. Participants also discussed the impact of recruit training on “the least experienced officers attempting to handle the toughest problems.” While participants discussed their understanding of training requirements such as communication and de-escalation training, it was the culture of recruit training that became a common thread among participants. One participant best summarized this common thread by stating “If academy instructors talk down to recruits and

treat them as less than human, then when recruit is an officer in a position of authority why would we expect any different from them?” Participants further described how “standing in a position of authority screaming in someone’s face” and “the use of foul language” during recruit training condition officers into practices that may escalate interactions with the public.

Participants also discussed the impact of “powerful police unions protecting bad apples.” Participants discussed their perceptions of a law enforcement “code of silence” that leads to “not just individual officers but groups that do this stuff without one of them standing up to stop it.” Individual officers do not feel safe or supported enough within the police culture to speak out, so they “refuse to point their finger at their brother or sister”, further entrenching the “bad apples and spoiling the bushel”. Participants perceived the Police Culture as preferring to place the blame externally, on politicians, “thugs”, and others rather than to look for those doing wrong within their own ranks.

Participants described how the Police Culture has led to negative perceptions within the community, particularly considering recent events. Multiple participants discussed the impact of Tyre Nichols’ death at the hands of law enforcement in Memphis, Tennessee (City of Memphis, 2023). One participant stated that “Tyre Nichols demonstrates that it’s the culture of policing as much as anything else.” Another participant stated that law enforcement is a “hard job to do right now, it was a hard job before, but it’s especially hard right now.” One participant best summed up the perceptions of Tyre Nichols’ death in stating “They knew full well they were being recorded and they still did it – makes you wonder what they do when they aren’t being recorded!” When discussing Tyre Nichol’s death, a common thread emerged among all participants which was best summed up by one participant’s statement that “I don’t know anybody that would be a law enforcement officer right now.”

### ***Subtheme: Militarization***

Multiple participants discussed perceptions of militarization of law enforcement. This perception involves both the language and look of policing. Participants reported the use of military terms regarding law enforcement in their communities, including “we had the arsenal of law enforcement tucked away”, “they’re the ones on the front line”, “they’re the army that’s readily available”, and “they have the weapons and equipment.” One participant described the transition of their local law enforcement investigators from a suit and tie with shoulder holster to a tactical uniform with gun belt and pouches.

Some participants attributed the militarization of law enforcement to the rise of terrorism, including domestic terrorism. Other participants acknowledged the role of ambushes and assassinations of law enforcement officers in militarization. One participant described militarization as emerging from a growing war-like mentality that pits law enforcement as defenders of the community from terrorists and criminals.

While participants acknowledged the dangers of law enforcement, the perception of militarization was not positive. One participant summed up this perception in stating “we’re not the military, we’re public servants.” While there are dangers in a law enforcement career, participants expressed concern over comments such as “dangers and violence abound” or “we can’t let the thugs take over.” The perception was that these comments separate law enforcement from the community and may lead some law enforcement officers to view community members, especially those of color, as potential threats rather than the citizens that law enforcement serves. Participants acknowledged that the Fire & EMS Service is also commonly referred to as paramilitary. However, participants described paramilitary in terms of chain of command or rank structure rather than in acquiring military-style equipment, weapons, or uniforms.

### ***Subtheme: Civilian Behavior***

Several participants acknowledged that, like perceptions of law enforcement, they find themselves wondering why citizens do not obey law enforcement commands in situations where excessive force may have been used. This was a concerning perception for the participants reporting it, as these participants struggled with the feeling of siding with law enforcement over victims of excessive force. Participants reported questioning “why won’t you just answer the question”, “why won’t you get out of the car”, “why won’t you get on the ground”, and feeling that if the citizen had just complied then law enforcement may not have responded in an excessive manner. Simultaneously, these participants acknowledged that the victims in these situations may have responded from fear of law enforcement or a sense of indignation from the belief they were stopped solely due to the color of their skin. Participants reflected that there was a need to question “what provoked the situation to escalate the way it did?” Participants opined with potential answers such as “I gotta start recording it” and “so many people have guns and other weapons.” One participant noted that “people deeming themselves as guardians of the neighborhood adds to feel of oppressive authority.”

### ***Subtheme: Public Safety Unity***

Many participants discussed the common mission and shared public service of the Law Enforcement and Fire & EMS services. Descriptive terms included “brothers in arms”, “brothers and sisters in public safety”, “back the blue”, and “we’ve got each other’s backs.” Some participants pointed out the similarities between law enforcement and the fire prevention aspect of Fire & EMS, specifically fire investigators and code enforcement officers. One participant stated that their community integrates law enforcement with fire & EMS through the Rescue Task Force concept and by establishing unified incident command. The two agencies prepare for

this close working relationship through joint tabletop exercises and shared management of planned events within the community.

Participants also noted that this close working relationship between fire, EMS, and law enforcement can be detrimental. One participant summed this up by stating “I think we have to separate ourselves even though we are both first responders” due to the different mentalities of Fire & EMS versus Law Enforcement. This was described as “you get that mentality of cops, like just get him in there (the ambulance) and get him where he’s going” while as EMS providers we need to have compassion for our patient and take time to assess and care for them.

Many participants noted the difficulty that the police mentality can have on providing quality patient care, such as in the case of Tyre Nichols (City of Memphis, 2023). Participants described the danger of conformity bias in the close working relationship between law enforcement and fire & EMS as leading to fire & EMS taking a step back and not being objective where law enforcement has acted. One participant stated that “if a citizen was treating our patient this way when we pulled up, we would intervene immediately but because it’s police we just go along with it.” Not only does conformity bias have implications for patient care, but it can also be emotionally challenging for fire & EMS responders. In referring to incident of excessive force, one participant described the emotional challenge as “it affects us a great deal because we know these people, we know some of them personally, and it shocks us that they would do things like this.”

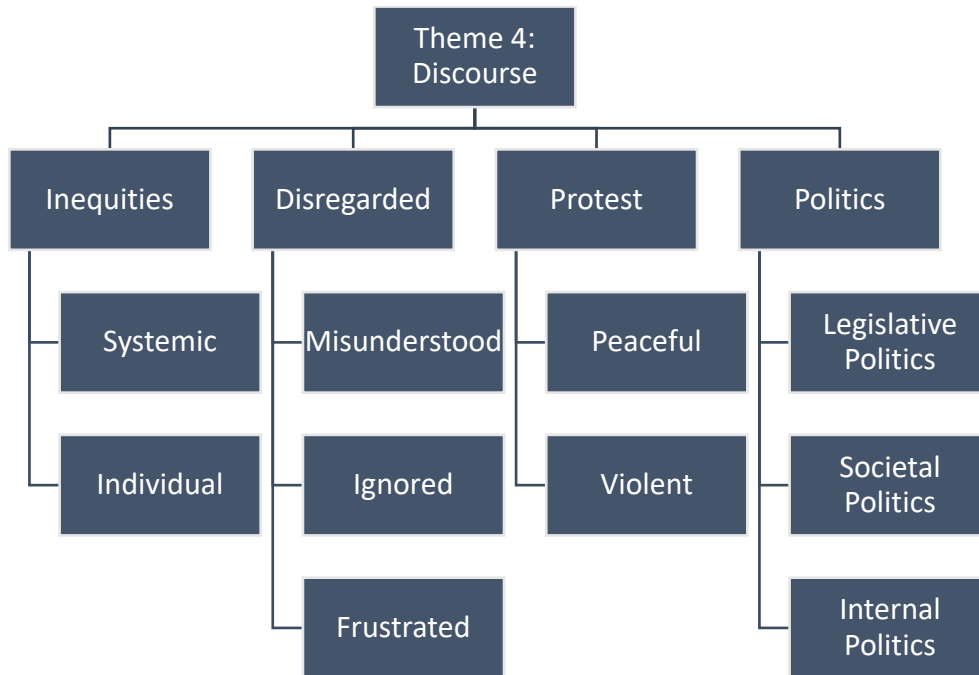
#### **Theme 4: Discourse**

This theme includes four subthemes and ten coded meaning units. This theme focuses on types of communication and barriers to communication within the social justice movement. Participants perceived discourse in terms of not being given equal standing to express concerns (inequities), not having concerns heard (disregarded), and in the protest, both peaceful and

violent, to gain equal voice and be heard. Participants also described the role of politics at all levels in social justice discourse.

**Figure 5**

*Theme 4: Discourse*



***Subtheme: Inequities***

Participants discussed wide ranging inequities within the Fire & EMS Service. This data was grouped within two coded meaning units, Systemic and Individual. Systemic inequities were identified as barriers in recruitment, hiring, retention, and promotion of under-represented or marginalized groups within the Fire & EMS Service. One participant described a recent conversation in which a white male firefighter asserted that female firefighters were physically weaker and less capable than male firefighters, leading to their lack of success in hiring on to the agency and then promoting within it. The participant noted that the lack of female officers among senior ranks limits their voice within the department. The participant discussed the

firefighter's statement as illustrating a systemic barrier within the Fire & EMS Service. The participant questioned "we can put women in combat, they can go to space, they can be law enforcement officers, but somehow they can't be firefighters?"

At an individual level, one participant described an emotionally challenging situation in which a black female firefighter was pressured to straighten her hair during recruit school for her helmet to sit properly. While the participant, and the recruit, acknowledged the importance of helmet fit for safety, the participant noted the lack of support or concern for the impact on the recruit from this requirement. Straightening the recruit's hair required a chemical process which led to irritation and itching, with the recruit being singled out and punished for scratching her head during class. The participant noted that this situation dampened the recruit's enthusiasm and led her to focus more on just making it to graduation than on excelling within the recruit environment.

***Subtheme: Disregarded***

Participants described a perception of voices for social justice being disregarded by first being misunderstood without an attempt to understand and then when the message is understood, having it ignored. Participants described perceptions of frustration within the social justice movement at having been disregarded. These perceptions were grouped into the coded meaning units Misunderstood, Ignored, and Frustrated. Multiple participants identified the efforts of Colin Kaepernick as an example of social justice statements being misunderstood (Britannica, 2023). One participant described the situation as Kaepernick being "totally misunderstood". Participants likened this misunderstanding of Kaepernick's message to miscommunication between law enforcement and people of color. One participant described it as law enforcement believing they are doing their job while people of color believe they are being targeted for their skin color when being pulled over or stopped while walking down the street.

A participant stated that even when Kaepernick clarified the intent of his message, he was shunned and ignored. Participants perceived that, whether within the Fire & EMS or not, there are people who pretend that inequities do not exist or that racism does not happen. Participants perceived that even when social justice messages are made as welcoming as possible, the message is too often ignored. One participant described this as “everyone hasn’t come together to speak up when we see something wrong, some do but others just act like it isn’t happening.”

Participants reported that perceptions of being misunderstood or ignored could be frustrating in many ways. Participants described the perceived frustration of being disregarded as leading some in the social justice movement to engage in acts of protest, which will be discussed further in the next coded meaning unit. Participants also described perceived frustration as taking many forms within the Fire & EMS Service. One participant related multiple instances of frustration during bias training within their department in which attendees “heard something they didn’t like so they just got up and walked out.” Another participant described their agency’s transition to virtual training sessions, but with the frustration that “virtual allows people to just tune out of conversations they don’t like.” One participant summed up this subtheme best in stating that “people just aren’t willing to address the issues or take steps to handle the issues that are out there”, leading to perceptions of being disregarded and feelings of frustration.

### ***Subtheme: Protest***

Study participants mapped the violent protests following the death of George Floyd to the frustrations of being disregarded and the lack of success of peaceful demonstrations in attracting enough attention to bring about change. Perceptions of Peaceful Protest were grouped into one coded meaning unit while perceptions of Violent Protest were grouped into a second coded meaning unit. Participants identified peaceful protest as “the friendlier approach to social

justice”. Participants described peaceful protest as “mostly peaceful demonstrations” with “groups getting together publicly just to say what they saw was wrong.” These peaceful protests “brought out some people who were so supportive and so positive, but also made some people so angry that they stood up” in violent protest.

Participants perceived that “there were plenty that attempted to do peaceful approaches, but it did not have the same effect as violence, which is unfortunate” because protests following the death of George Floyd were then perceived to be violent anarchy. “The fact that it had not been addressed, it had been ignored, so it was a buildup” was not recognized and many communities were unprepared for the level of protest even though “there were warnings.” Participants described this escalation as “the interplay of the peaceful protest that was ignored leading to the violent protest that followed.”

### ***Subtheme: Politics***

Participants perceived the influence of politics in how people view and respond to the social justice movement. One participant summed this perspective up in stating that “the social justice reform issue is playing out in politics.” Three coded meaning units emerged under Politics subtheme, Legislative Politics, Societal Politics, and Internal Politics. The Legislative Politics coded meaning unit encompasses perceptions of the United States Congress. Participants perceived the negative tone set by watching elected officials in the United States Congress argue with each other. One participant noted that “we’re all citizens of one country and it’s supposed to be family.” The participant noted that the nation is being divided by politics “and that division is being played out by lawmakers in DC and it’s filtering down to everybody else and so people are starting to pick up on that and it’s causing problems.”

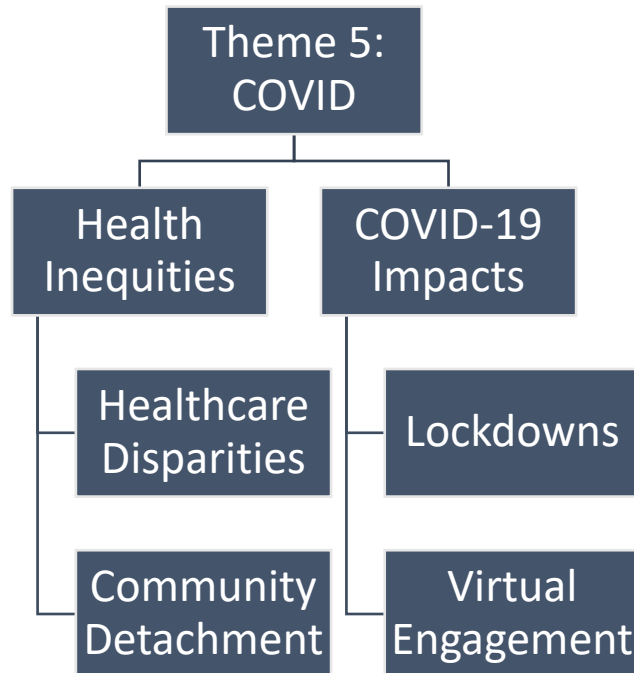
Participants perceived legislative politics as influencing societal politics. One participant noted that “a lot of people out there don’t believe in social justice.” Another noted that “it’s not just George Floyd at this point, now it’s everything that’s come along with the different political views and wherever you stand.” Participants noted that these perceptions have become entrenched, with little potential for change, stating that “some people have dug their feet in the ground on where they stand.” This entrenched division has been detrimental to society in general, with participants reporting a breakdown in decorum. One participant noted that “it’s become acceptable again to use certain language and terminology that is completely awful and it’s happening to our own people.” The internal politics of the Fire & EMS Service were perceived as following the same general trends of societal politics. Participants perceived that open discussion of social justice within the fire service may be limited in the fire station environment. As one participant put it, social justice “doesn’t really get talked about much unless you’re talking to somebody one on one and you’re getting their own political viewpoint about what’s going on.”

### **Theme 5: COVID**

Participants identified the COVID-19 pandemic as playing a significant role in the influence of the social justice movement. Healthcare Inequities and COVID-19 Impacts emerged as subthemes within this theme. These subthemes illustrate the common perceptions of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in that it revealed healthcare inequities and changed the way in which the world interacts.

**Figure 6**

*Theme 5: COVID*



***Subtheme: Healthcare Inequities***

One participant best described COVID-19’s revelation of healthcare disparities, stating that COVID-19 “ripped the scab off all the inequities that people of color, under-represented, marginalized” populations experience. Participants pointed that credible studies have revealed that healthcare providers “treat people differently based on the color of their skin.” Participants described the healthcare disparities revealed by COVID-19 as a public health issue, stating that “public health is a systems issue”, making it a social justice issue.

Participants described Community Detachment as the refusal of some fire & EMS personnel to receive the COVID-19 vaccination when required to do so by their agency. Participants discussed that many of the personnel refusing vaccinations did not live in the community in which they worked. Long commutes from distant homes can result in the commuting personnel

not feeling vested in their agency's community or its healthcare concerns. One participant described this lack of being vested in the community as "I don't really need to know you or care about you because I don't live in your community, I just come here for the money."

### ***Subtheme: COVID-19 Impacts***

Participants identified the COVID-19 pandemic as creating barriers to the social justice movement while also creating opportunities, which became coded meaning units within this subtheme. Participants described the perception of COVID-19 as having "struck in the midst of it all" regarding social justice movement protests. This perception enhanced the influence of COVID-19 within the social justice movement.

An obvious barrier created by COVID-19 were official lockdowns, limiting public engagement and discourse, for months at a time. Many participants described the impact of lockdowns on their agencies, relating that COVID-19 was "very stressful for every department." Participants described the lockdowns as limiting training and other engagement within their agencies until a transition could be made to virtual engagement. These long periods of lockdown led a perception of "disassociation of social justice efforts."

The rise of virtual engagement platforms and practices was identified as an opportunity by many participants. Virtual engagement provided an opportunity to resume training, meetings, and other forms of engagement. This engagement allowed department leaders to "kind of drop in, listen in, see what's going on" even when they were not able to do so in person. However, participants also discussed a perception that it can be "difficult to get any benefit or feedback or have a difficult conversation" through virtual engagement.

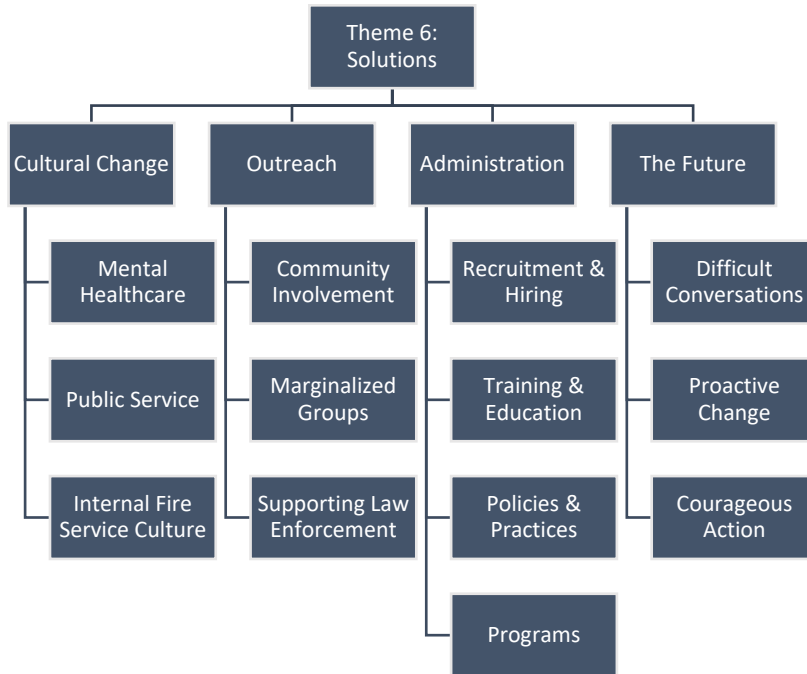
### **Theme 6: Solutions**

With four subthemes and fourteen coded meaning units, Theme 6: Solutions had the most data assigned to it of any theme. Subthemes within this theme include Cultural Change,

Outreach, Administration, and The Future. The subthemes and coded meaning units within this theme are presented here but will be synthesized and discussed further in Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations.

**Figure 7**

*Theme 6: Solutions*



***Subtheme: Cultural Change***

Participants identified Mental Healthcare as an important aspect of Cultural Change within the Fire & EMS Service. This coded meaning unit encompasses two primary concepts, mental healthcare for responders and mental healthcare provided by responders. Participants perceived a need for cultural change to better manage the mental health of fire & EMS responders. One participant described this concept as “we should take care of ourselves, and departments should take care of their people.” Participants described a wide variety of issues that affect the mental health of fire & EMS responders including the fact that “we recruited

superheroes, but we don't fight as many fires as we would like to think." There is also a perception that social justice efforts within the Fire & EMS Service contribute to mental health concerns, with one participant stating that "it's exhausting, it's sad to watch, from all sides of the table." Some participants noted the suicide rate within the Fire & EMS Service, stating that "this job is great but it's not worth losing your life." One participant, commenting on the suicide of Firefighter/Paramedic Nicole Mittendorf, stated "people understand when you sign up for this job you could lose your life, it's what we signed up for to do extreme circumstances, but not to get treated poorly by your coworkers" (Nicol, 2016). Participants advocated for all members of the Fire & EMS Service to receive enhanced mental health training focused on helping members in "managing your emotions, your triggers" as well as "things that help people cope and deal with things effectively."

The concerns of participants for the mental health of fire & EMS responders extends to the practice of fire & EMS responders replacing or supplementing police in responding to persons experiencing emotional disturbances. Some participants reported that their city officials, not fire or police leaders, decided which agencies would respond to mental health crises. One participant whose department is new to this type of response, stated "we are responding to mental health crises while also dealing with our own mental health crises." Another participant reported the perception within their agency is that members "signed up to help people but not necessarily with their thoughts and feelings." Still another reported that "we don't know this behavioral health piece because we usually stage for police in these situations."

Public Service is the foundation of the Fire & EMS Service and participants discussed it at length. Data within this coded meaning unit focuses on developing and maintaining the mindset of a servant leader. One participant related that "one of the biggest things that we have

to realize individually is that we are public servants first.” Comments followed stating fire & EMS responders have a “duty to respond and act and to serve our community regardless of any personal beliefs we may have” and that “we’re public servants, our job is to protect everybody, we don’t get to pick and choose.” Participants stated that public servants have a duty to “be empathetic and try to understand the people we are dealing with.” Participants advocated for elevating pride in public service within the Fire & EMS Service by capturing a sense of service and promoting service and teamwork. One participant described this as “we’ve got to make picking up Grandma in the middle of the night just as important as going to a big fire.” Another participant summed up this coded meaning unit by stating “ultimately it’s about serving the people.”

Participants were emphatic that the culture of the Fire & EMS Service must change to embrace social justice. “Social justice isn’t just a fad that’s going to fade away” is how one participant described it. Another stated that “we will face a reckoning like you’re seeing with law enforcement, it’s going to happen one way or the other, if we won’t change our culture then the culture will change us.” A summarization of this concept is that we “need to transform our organization and break up the roots of the fire service, acknowledging that the roots run deep and maybe even grieving it if you have to, but understanding change must come.” Another summarization is that “we all have to understand tradition so we can move forward and do things differently in order to grow.” Another participant posited that “we have got to change and be more educated and more open and more understanding of the world around us or our little bubble is not going to continue to last.”

To achieve change, participants suggested the Fire & EMS Service question it’s efforts, asking “are we using Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) as buzzwords, to check boxes, or to

make it look pretty from the outside?” Are our DEI efforts “window dressing or are we getting down and dirty?” Fire & EMS Service leads should be introspective of their DEI efforts, asking “are we creating places for people” and “are we encouraging belonging?” Fire & EMS Service personnel should examine their own feelings regarding DEI efforts, asking themselves “do you feel like you belong here”, “are you comfortable here”, and “do you feel ownership here?” One participant summarized this concept by saying “if we say everyone is welcome then we need to be welcoming to everyone.”

Another aspect of the cultural change identified by participants is the lack of understanding of the needs of newer members and therefore a lack of changes to help them be successful. Participants described how “people come on to the job wanting to make an impact, if we don’t give them that opportunity, they’re going to leave to go somewhere else or do something else.” Fire & EMS Service leaders must “allow them to have a purpose, show them they can make a difference” if they are to retain members from newer generations.

Participants expressed that the Fire & EMS Service should not “shy away from our differences, but instead should recognize them, value them, and use them.” There are “a lot of people from different culture backgrounds that are more willing to step up and speak out” in helping the Fire & EMS Service acknowledge and value these differences. To capitalize on the value of differences, participants stated that the Fire & EMS Service must “empower everyone with the tools to go out there and be successful” while also understanding that tools needed will be different for everyone. Fire & EMS Service leaders must “understand everyone needs leadership in different ways”, with some people needing more direction, while others need less, meaning it can’t be one size fits all.

The Fire & EMS Service must encourage members “to be their genuine, authentic selves, not just going along to get along” according to participants. This thought continued with “it’s ok that we don’t agree on things but at the end of the day we have to treat everyone with respect and dignity, and we have to create an environment where everyone has an opportunity.” Another participant added that “it’s ok to have beliefs but you shouldn’t push your beliefs on anyone else and it shouldn’t make someone else feel a certain way.” Participants advocated for all members to “understand that you have a voice, use your voice, and set boundaries.” One participant was optimistic that “if we keep our lines of communication open, I think we’re going to be ok.”

To be successful, participants indicated that “social justice has to be a priority for upper management.” This presents challenges when seniors leaders are in the final years of their career, with participants perceiving these leaders feeling that “I’m just riding out my time and I’m afraid of change so close to the end” or “I’ve put in my time, I’m too old to change.” Participant perceptions indicated that Battalion Chiefs and Captains “should be the main folks that we try to get to understand social justice” as that level of leadership is the most effective place to implement change. One participant summarized this concept by stating that “it’s what goes on in the firehouse that counts” while another stated that “it’s what goes on in the back of the ambulance” that is the most important level for change. Participants advocated that the Fire & EMS Service strive for change at the company officer level, including updating Battalion Chief and Captain job descriptions to specify their responsibility for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion within their span of control. Participants also advocated for holding Fire & EMS personnel accountable for their actions, specifically referencing the updated job descriptions.

### ***Subtheme: Outreach***

The Outreach subtheme focuses on the Fire & EMS Service reaching out to and engaging with the community. Data in this subtheme is grouped into three coded meaning units, Community Involvement, Marginalized Groups, and Supporting Law Enforcement. Participants were adamant about community outreach and engagement. One participant emphasized the “need to engage with the community so they understand how we see our mission and we understand how they see it.” Fire & EMS agencies must understand their community’s expectations and whether the agency is meeting them. Participants expressed that if expectations are not being met, Fire & EMS leaders must be transparent about the discrepancy and honest about whether they can or cannot meet the expectations in the future. Participants advocated for fire & EMS leaders to ask if their agency is tied into the “fabric of the community”. Participants stated that “we have automatic seats at the table where we can engage with community leaders” and that “we need to be proactive, we need to get out there.” One participant offered a unique perspective in stating that “it’s not my department, it’s the community’s department.” That participant continued “we must challenge ourselves to understand the community we are part of.” Participants noted that different cultures and languages within the community can serve as barriers to engage but that fire & EMS leaders should seek out translators and others to help breakdown these barriers.

Participants also advocated for fire & EMS leaders to engage with marginalized groups within the community. One participant stated that “we can engage with social justice leaders and really have a better understanding to bring it back and change our organization.” Another posited that “we need to be going out to those community groups, asking the hard questions, and putting

ourselves in uncomfortable situations, and getting that feedback.” A participant described this outreach to marginalized groups as playing a part in the healing process of the community.

Participants also advocated for the Fire & EMS Service to partner with and promote the Law Enforcement Service to the community. Despite the perception of danger in partnering with law enforcement in this contentious time, participants noted that fire & EMS personnel depend on law enforcement and vice versa. The success of law enforcement within the community is directly related to the success of Fire & EMS. One participant noted this as “we’re out there serving the public together and we’ve got to let the public know that.”

***Subtheme: Administration***

One participant summed up the importance of data within the Administration subtheme stating, “we get sued for administrative issues not fireground decisions.” The data within this subtheme are grouped into four coded meaning units including Recruitment & Hiring, Training & Education, Policies & Practices, and Programs. All participants have experience relevant to each coded meaning unit.

Each participant emphasized the importance of recruitment and hiring to their agency and to the community. This emphasis took two forms, first recruiting and hiring diverse candidates from under-represented populations within the community. Second, hiring candidates who have character, which participants perceived as living by a strong moral code.

Participants described common complaints in recruiting as “we’re not getting any females” or “we’re not getting an under-represented groups to apply.” One participant asked “Well, what are you doing to attract them?” Participants advocated for the Fire & EMS Service to recruit for diversity, recruiting people that make up the community. One participant summed this up in stating that “part of social injustice is that we don’t appeal to under-represented populations within our community.” Participants also perceived that recruiting for diversity does

not end with getting a candidate in the door. The hiring agency “needs to truly welcome diversity, make people feel part of the team, give them the ability to make an impact, not just stick them on the ambulance for five years and not just throw money at them.”

Participants discussed at length the need to hire people with character. One participant described this as “hire people who can understand our values and how important they are and who can incorporate our values into their own.” Participants emphasized the importance of the initial character assessment because a person’s “character doesn’t change much over time.” Another participant illustrated this concept by describing how their agency hired candidates without a social media check and later found that two recent hires carried extremist views that were expressed on duty. An administrative investigation determined that both candidates openly expressed their membership in extremist groups on their social media accounts. Candidates must understand that what they do off-duty “has the potential to diminish the faith of the community in our agency.” Participants reported that many agencies utilize psychological testing to help determine a candidate’s character, but that psychological testing must consider the differing cultures and backgrounds of diverse candidates to truly understand their character.

Participants also discussed the need to recruit candidates who view fire & EMS as more than just another job. Participants described how “some people come onto the job because it’s got good pay and benefits, not because they have the passion to make this a career.” Participants advocated for the “need to consider each recruit from the beginning of their coming into the organization all the way into professional development and succession planning.” Participants also reported on recent trends of newer members changing agencies or leaving fire & EMS altogether. Participants perceived that this trend may indicate issues with the recruitment and

hiring processes. “When people leave, we need to understand why and how that reflects on our recruitment and hiring” processes, as one participant explained.

Participants carried the concept of diversity from recruitment and hiring into training and education. Participants promoted the need for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion training while also acknowledging the concerns of fire & EMS personnel about the training. “Oh gosh, it’s another cultural diversity class, do I really have to take it?” Participants described the “worries about the class being anti-white or critical race theory.” One participant reported that some members of their agency were “insulted that the class was even going on.” Participants described the importance of fire & EMS leadership supporting DEI training, breaking down the rhetoric surrounding these courses and working to reduce the fear that some members may feel about them.

Participants espoused beliefs that social justice should be a frequent topic in training and education. “The social justice piece should be in front of all of us on a regular basis – can’t just be annual or semi-annual.” Participants advocated that “bias training should be required at every promotional level.” Fire & EMS leaders have “got to be educated and more understanding of the world around us.” Participants advocated for bringing in subject matter experts to provide students with the tools to support social justice. One participant described their department’s efforts “Everyone went through conflict resolution training and now everyone is going through emotional intelligence training. It’s an educational process not just a check in the box.”

Within the Policies & Practices coded meaning unit, participants identified several common threads including incident response practices, support for responders, and providing inclusive policies. Participants widely described collecting agency data for analysis such as in a standards of cover document. One participant described a standards of cover analysis revealing

that over 70% of incident responses in their agency are for EMS runs and of those EMS runs, 40% are “non-emergent service calls.” The participant described the difficulty of accepting that most runs handled by their agency are just service calls. This creates a need to refocus the organization, not forgetting fires and other emergencies, but placing an emphasis on preventing these non-emergent service calls. The participant stated, “social justice is showing that we do things more on the preventive side than just the response side.”

These non-emergent service calls place a strain on fire & EMS responders. Participants described reduced staffing in many agencies as increasing the burden on the remaining personnel. The result is many long shifts, at times on mandatory overtime, which exhaust personnel and create a potential for poor incident outcomes. One participant described this as “just get on the cot, I don’t have time for this, I’ve been here 70 hours and still have 2 more to go before I’m relieved.” Participants discussed a variety of measures to support responders such as consulting with nutritionists, strength & conditioning coaches, and working to improve the sleep of responders while on long shifts.

Participants discussed a practice in many communities of law enforcement responding with fire & EMS, even for non-emergent service calls. Participants questioned why this practice emerged and why it continues in many communities. Participants discussed a “heightened potential for something to go wrong” when law enforcement is present on scene without a need for law enforcement to be there. Participants expressed the need for policies for fire & EMS personnel to immediately request a supervisor if “police are preventing us from performing our mission.”

Participants identified a need to review written policies and procedures to ensure they are inclusive. This includes a “need to understand at a cellular level what inclusion is” such as

having maternity policies and providing uniforms and PPE designed for women. Many participants advocated for hiring consulting firms to assist in this review. These consulting firms will help to assess adverse impact and make sure the language is inclusive. Some participants described the creation of “equity teams” within their agency to perform these and other social justice-related duties.

Participants expanded the perception of inclusive policies into the day-to-day life of fire & EMS personnel. Participants identified the need to “set clear expectations then help people rise to meet those expectations” as a social justice issue that create “consistent and equal opportunities for everyone to compete.” One participant described a scenario in which a new probationary member was handed a list of “unwritten rules” upon arriving at their first assignment. Many of the “unwritten rules” were perceived to be demeaning, leading the probationary member to discuss the issue with a supervisor. The agency identified that many of the “unwritten rules” were intended to help probationary members be successful in their first year but were not presented in a welcoming or inclusive manner. The original author was assigned to work with senior leaders to rewrite the document to be inclusive and supportive of probationary members. This effort was a success and probationary members are now issued this document department-wide.

Many participants described a trend in focusing on welcoming and supporting the newest members of their agencies, leaving behind traditions of the past that served to demean or belittle probationary members. While probationary members continue to perform work that may be unpleasant such as mopping floors or cleaning bathrooms, the work is shared among all members of the team and is not specifically targeted to demonstrate the low standing of probationary members. This concept is not an easy one to accept with one participant explaining

that “we have to start thinking that way and even when I talk to my chief friends some of them are like, uh, no, I don’t know.”

Participants described their agencies as beginning to establish new programs that focus on engaging the workforce and the community. Workforce engagement programs included creating equity committees, writing racial equity action plans, and comprehensive health plans for agency employees. Community engagement programs included establishing a Fire Explorers program, creating a citizen’s fire academy, supporting the local Community Emergency Response Team (CERT), and establishing an “official program of community engagement.”

### ***Subtheme: The Future***

All participants expressed their visions for the future of the Fire & EMS Service. These visions took several different forms, having Difficult Conversations, taking Courageous Action, and making Proactive Change. Each form coalesced into a coded meaning unit. Much of the data assigned to these coded meaning units is explored further in Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations.

All participants discussed the need for and importance of difficult conversations. Participants expressed the need for training for officers at all levels, but particularly company officers, in how to facilitate a difficult conversation. “We don’t teach people how to talk and have the conversation” was a common concern among all participants. Training on understanding and engaging diverse communication styles was also identified as a critical need for facilitating difficult conversations. One participant stated that “bringing the issues to the forefront is what it’s all about.” Common questions arose that agencies and leaders should ask of themselves in having difficult conversations. “Are we addressing cultural differences?” “Are we addressing different mindsets?” Are we addressing who people say they want to be in terms of

gender?” Participants widely agreed the difficult conversations were crucial not only to advancing social justice within the Fire & EMS Service, but also to progressing the Fire & EMS Service as a societal benefit to communities nationwide. One participant summed this up stating “I can only hope that we continue to stand out, stand tall, have the conversations and 40 – 50 years from now it’s not an issue.”

One participant summarized the need for Proactive Change for social justice within the Fire & EMS Service in stating that “we’re gonna be pretty significantly impacted by it down the road because we are not addressing it.” Participants agreed that “we cannot be idle bystanders.” One participant advocated for fire & EMS leaders “becoming more strategic about social justice” while another stated that “we need to overhaul the entire system and remodel from the foundation up.” Participants perceived that proactive change necessitates “acknowledging, recognizing, and educating ourselves on the social justice movement.” Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts must include racial justice, but participants acknowledged that when we talk about social injustice within the Fire & EMS Service, “it’s bigger than just race.” Participants advocated for fire & EMS leaders to seek out diverse partners from within their community to assist in making proactive change. Participants also advocated that where adverse events of discrimination or harassment occur, fire & EMS leaders should capitalize on the ripple effects to create or support change within their agency.

To have difficult conversations and to make proactive change, participants agreed that fire & EMS leaders must take courageous action. Fire & EMS leaders making organizational and cultural changes are “taking risks.” One participant encouraged fire & EMS leaders to take action for change, “you’ve got to start having conversations and leaders have to be courageous to lead them and stand up for them.” Participants identified a key part of taking courageous action

as recognizing the “curiosity standpoint” of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The curiosity standpoint provides an opportunity for fire & EMS personnel to ask questions and build an understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion. One participant described this action as creating a “safe space for people to ask questions, for people to get it wrong, for people to say things that oh man, you probably shouldn’t say it that way, and correcting that in a safe space, that’s where it starts.” Another participant advocated for:

Making a safe space for everyone to ask questions and have an understanding because I think once you find commonalities and proximity to people within your own organization, it’s easier to have a better understanding of people outside the organization and the communities that we serve.

Participants advocated for creating these safe spaces despite the lack of understanding or even outright hostility to the term “safe space” from some within the Fire & EMS Service.

### **Summary**

Study participants provided substantial, meaningful, and rich data throughout the interviews. The 48 coded meaning units, 17 subthemes, and 6 themes detailed here represent over 10 hours and 24 minutes of interviews. Every interview presented an opportunity for the participants to relate their personal experiences with social justice. Participants took full advantage of these opportunities, demonstrating their passion for diversity, equity, and inclusion within the Fire & EMS Service. However, these opportunities came with a cost, as participants related deeply emotional experiences, often harmful and damaging acts of hostility perpetuated against the participant or in their presence. While the research results reported here are rich in quotations and participant descriptions, specific acts of hostility have been excluded from this reporting for the protection of the participants. Where possible, the specific acts of hostility were distilled into more generic descriptions to ensure the data was collected and reported. The

research participants are to be commended for their courage in providing interviews and sharing emotionally challenging experiences. Their dedication to the Fire & EMS Service and commitment to improving it shine as an example for all fire & EMS leaders to emulate.

## **CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Summary of the Results**

Over the course of the interviews with the study participants, six themes emerged in answering the research question “How do chief fire officers perceive the influence of the social justice movement that emerged following the death of George Floyd?” These themes form the foundation of answering the research question with abundant participant data authenticating each theme.

The first theme to emerge, Theme 1: The Social Justice Movement, focused on recognizing and understanding the social justice movement by defining social justice and identifying events, groups, and individuals significant to the social justice movement. Preventing further injustice was promoted by learning about past and current injustices to provide a foundation for action.

Theme 2: Lived Experience presented significant challenges to both participant and researcher as participants related deeply personal experiences of acts of hostility within the Fire & EMS Service. Participants related personal engagement with acts of hostility or witnessed acts of hostility. The deeply personal nature of this data led to enhanced confidentiality and protection from further harm. Participants also described their perceptions of bias recognition within the Fire & EMS Service, as it is accepted, at times with reluctance, or outright rejected.

Both the Fire & EMS Service as well as the Law Enforcement Service were closely examined within Theme 3: Public Safety Services. Participants explored civilian perspectives of both services, as well as their internal cultures. Perceptions were shared regarding the militarization of the police and perspectives on civilian behavior during law enforcement interactions. The intersection of both services was explored with perceptions of civilians confusing fire and police officers, fire & EMS members being both appalled at and defending law enforcement, and concerns over the affinity bias found in combined fire and police interactions.

Theme 4: Discourse examined perceptions of the national conversation surrounding social justice as it pertains to fire & EMS. Participants explored systemic and individual inequities as well as the frustrations that arise from being misunderstood or ignored. A connection was established between these frustrations and the rise of protests, both peaceful and violent. Finally, participants shared perceptions on the influence of legislative, societal, and internal Fire & EMS Service politics on the influence of the social justice movement.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the social justice movement was assessed in Theme 5: COVID. Participants recognized healthcare disparities and community detachment as being revealed due to the pandemic. Participants discussed the impact of public health lockdowns and the rise of virtual engagement within the Fire & EMS Service.

In addition to their perceptions of the current state, participants provided abundant solutions for the future of social justice within the Fire & EMS Service in Theme 6: Solutions. Participants advocated for cultural change in mental healthcare, public service mindsets, and within the internal Fire & EMS Service. Outreach was identified as primary solution for fire & EMS, focusing on community involvement, working with marginalized groups, and supporting

our law enforcement partners. Participants encouraged administrative changes within the Fire & EMS Service including in recruitment & hiring, training & education, policies & practices, and by establishing new programs. Finally, participants promoted their hope for the future of social justice within fire & EMS through facilitating difficult conversations, supporting proactive change, and leading courageous action.

Taken together, these research results answer the research question of how chief fire officers perceive the influence of the social justice movement that arose following the death of George Floyd. The study participants are well aware of the social justice movement and its influence on the Fire & EMS Service. Study participants even shared their perceptions on the need for fire & EMS to embrace the social justice movement and solutions for helping it do so.

### **Conclusions Based Upon the Results**

“It’s a dirty little secret.” This phrase was uttered again and again as participants discussed the culture of the Fire & EMS Service. The lived experiences of study participants show that the impact of social injustices on the Fire & EMS Service is both real and substantial. The study participants represented a diverse range of chief fire officers in terms of rank, geographic distribution, age, and gender, yet all of them have personally experienced acts of hostility perpetuated by members of the Fire & EMS Service. The study participants are all highly accomplished members of the fire service, well-versed in leadership, and passionate about the profession but all expressed some degree of dismay at the progress of social justice within the Fire & EMS Service. The importance of this perception cannot be understated. When highly accomplished chief fire officers with decades of dedicated experience are concerned about the progress of social justice, it is a reasonable anticipation that less-accomplished, or less-tenured members are even more concerned.

Through hours of interviews, study participants answered the question of “how do chief fire officers perceive the influence of the social justice movement that arose following the death of George Floyd.” The answer was that every chief fire officer that participated in the study was acutely aware of the social justice movement. Study participants recognized the influence of the social justice movement within their communities and within law enforcement. The participants also recognized that the social justice movement has limited influence with the Fire & EMS Service. Participants perceived that there is much work to be done to bring social justice to fire & EMS.

The study participants addressed the progress of social justice within the Fire & EMS Service by advocating for proactive change that will eliminate the dirty little secrets. The study participants encouraged a national conversation about social justice within the Fire & EMS Service. They expressed ideas for training programs to promote social justice and for the creation of environments where social justice conversations can be held without fear of reprisal.

Challenges in recruiting and retaining diverse candidates were reported by all study participants. They also perceived an increasing trend of less-tenured members leaving for new agencies or leaving fire & EMS altogether. Study participants attributed these trends to the lack of a welcoming culture in fire & EMS. They explained that new members need to belong, to feel ownership, and to make an impact. Addressing these needs is an important element in providing a foundation for all members to achieve success. But addressing these needs will also require breaking with the tradition of making new members demonstrate again and again that they know their place and it is at the bottom.

Breaking with these norms carries high risk in the tradition-bound fire & EMS service. Many members hold tightly to tradition, even as they acknowledge that some of their traditions

limit social justice progress or present a less than welcoming face to new members.

Unfortunately, these are the “fire service culture norms that no one wants to discuss because they are too ugly.” It is just that type of discussion, a difficult conversation, that study participants encourage. Study participants indicated that is essential for chief fire officers to bring these traditions and cultural norms to light. Through honest, transparent discussion these traditions or norms can be eliminated or modified to support social justice rather than prevent it. Study participants were clear that tradition is an important aspect of fire & EMS, but also that tradition must advance, not hinder, social justice.

The study participants illustrated the importance of the study by describing the prominent role that chief fire officers play within their communities and within their agencies. Chief fire officers are poised to lead change, but they must understand what change is needed. This understanding comes from awareness of the social justice movement and its influence, whether in the community or in the Fire & EMS Service. This study and others like it will provide the foundation for awareness and a supportive structure to promote change.

### **Limitations**

The study had several limitations including the small sample size, the demographics of the study participants, and the sheer volume of data collected. Another significant limitation was the critical need for participant confidentiality. Each limitation was considered and addressed in reporting the research results and developing recommendations for the Fire & EMS Service.

The most critical limitation in the study was the need to protect the confidentiality of study participants. Study participants described intensely emotional experiences with social injustices perpetuated by fire & EMS personnel either against the participant or against others including members of the public. These experiences were collected along with all other

participant data but were excluded from study results to prevent further harm to the participants. Additional collected data and some participant demographics were excluded or generalized to prevent deductive disclosure of participant identities. These measures precluded the use of some data and the full reporting of research results.

Another primary limitation of the study is the small sample size. The number of chief fire officers participating in the study represented a tiny sample of the chief fire officer population within the United States and Canada, even when considering just those chief fire officers who are members of the International Association of Fire Chiefs. While the sample represents widely distributed demographics, the limited size makes it difficult to generalize all concepts to the entire Fire & EMS Service.

The familiarity of participants with social justice presented another limitation for the study. All participants were members of the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC), and all were graduates of executive leadership programs that included lessons on social justice. Study participants may be better informed and more aware of social justice influences than chief fire officers who are not members of the IAFC and had not attended social justice training.

The sheer amount of data collected from study participants presented a substantial limitation for the study. The collected data included nearly 10.5 hours of audio recordings, over 50 pages of written transcripts, and demographics data for each participant. This vast amount of data limited the ability to explore specific topic areas or issues. With such a large volume of data to examine, the March 1, 2023, submission deadline for the Capstone Research Paper placed additional emphasis on reporting results and reaching conclusions across all data collected, without investigating results further.

## **Implications and Recommendations to the Field**

The copious data provided by study participants created fertile ground for identifying recommendations to improve social justice within the Fire & EMS Service. Most importantly, this requires refocusing agency and individual mindsets to make proactive changes embracing social justice within fire & EMS. The following recommendations flow from the analysis of participant data.

Foremost in making proactive change is defining social justice and recognizing key elements of the social justice movement. If chief fire officers understand social justice, they can apply that knowledge to prevent future injustices. Chief fire officers must be aware of the history of social justice within the Fire & EMS Service and within their own agencies. Teach this history when orienting new members to the Fire & EMS Service and when guiding incumbent members through cultural change.

Understanding social justice creates awareness of the harm caused by injustice. Chief fire officers must be aware of the impacts their personnel experience from injustices, especially acts of hostility, including those directed at them and those they witness. Policies and practices should be developed and implemented to prevent future harm and to protect and restore those who have already been harmed.

One way for chief fire officers to prevent further harm is to help personnel understand that everyone has personal biases and that having biases does not mean someone is a bad person. Bias recognition training can help members identify their own biases and develop strategies to mitigate their effects. Chief fire officers must actively work to promote bias recognition training among their personnel, breaking down barriers that may arise such as fear of change or feeling uncomfortable upon recognizing a personal bias.

Chief fire officers should break down barriers by creating safe spaces to hold difficult conversations about bias and social justice. While the term “safe space” may itself be controversial, the concept is crucial to allowing personnel to learn and grow safely. Safe spaces focus on allowing members to ask questions, get things wrong, be corrected, develop new understandings, and learn new ways of communicating in a supportive environment.

Difficult conversations must occur at all levels of the agency, but a specific focus should be the promotion of social justice at the level of company officers (Captains) and their direct supervisors (Battalion Chiefs). Conversations that occur within the firehouse environment can be challenging and Captains and Battalion Chiefs require specialized training to facilitate difficult conversations. Specialized training should include strategies for implementing and ensuring diversity, equity, and inclusion at the battalion and company levels. Chief fire officers should revise Battalion Chief and Captain job descriptions to hold those officers accountable for social justice within their span of control.

As chief fire officers gain a deeper understanding of social justice, they should begin to assess where inequities exist within their agencies. Chief fire officers should recognize that when inequity exists, it quiets the voices of under-represented or marginalized populations within the agency. This limits the ability of these populations to help influence change or growth in the organization. Chief fire officers must hear the voices of those speaking out and seek to understand their message, especially where voices may be muted in the organization.

The fire service culture of the past, while it established important traditions, often did not welcome or value individual differences. This led many fire & EMS personnel to suppress their individual differences in favor of a “go along to get along” mentality. Chief fire officers must

actively work for cultural change to value the diversity of their membership and make the fire service a welcoming place for all people.

Cultural change efforts will be particularly important in recruiting and retaining diverse candidates, especially those candidates who may not traditionally consider a role in public safety. Chief fire officers can make the fire service a welcoming profession by encouraging and valuing contributions from all members. Every member must be provided with the same foundation for achieving success. Recruit and probationary training must be retooled to avoid authoritarian practices such as screaming in faces, using foul language, or belittling our newest members through the assignment of demeaning tasks.

Chief fire officers should provide tools for diversity, equity, and inclusion at all levels of their organization. This training should include fundamental skills such as conflict resolution training, emotional intelligence training, bias recognition training, and diversity, equity, and inclusion training. Instructors should be charged with blending these concepts into existing training programs such as basic firefighter, emergency medical, and officer training.

Reduced staffing and mandatory overtime have become commonplace in fire & EMS. These practices impose physical and emotional impacts on responders. Physical and emotional exhaustion can lead to or exacerbate interpersonal conflict and create poor outcomes during interactions with other responders, medical patients, and members of the public. Chief fire officers must actively work to create staffing solutions that reduce the toll on responders. Chief fire officers should support the physical and mental health of their members by hiring or consulting with nutritionists, strength and conditioning coaches, and behavioral health clinicians.

Chief fire officers must develop internal teams or consult with experts to review new and existing agency policies and procedures for adverse impact and inclusive language. Agencies

should develop new policies and procedures that promote inclusiveness. Recruiting diverse candidates into fire & EMS will require transparent and inclusive policies and procedures to ensure everyone is welcome and has a strong foundation for success.

When disciplinary issues occur, chief fire officers should consider refocusing their investigative processes. Rather than build a case for punitive action, disciplinary investigators should instead collect and evaluate all evidence to understand what happened and why. Where possible, explore creative solutions that shift discipline from a punitive process to one of education and personal growth.

Looking beyond their own agency, chief fire officers must reevaluate their relationship with law enforcement. While law enforcement is a public safety partner, that relationship must not be allowed to prevent us from fulfilling our mission to help citizens, even in the face of objections from law enforcement officers. Chief fire officers must have honest conversations with the law enforcement leaders about where they can support each other and where their missions divide. Hold law enforcement accountable when issues arise, but partner with them to promote their success wherever possible.

Beyond the bounds of government, chief fire officers have a seat at the table of community leadership. They should leverage that seat to truly understand how the community views their agency and what the community wants from the agency. Chief fire officers must step out of their comfort zone to reach out to under-represented and marginalized populations within the community. Chief fire officers should promote social justice by collecting and analyzing response data to understand how the community utilizes fire & EMS services. Identify response categories where prevention efforts within the community may be beneficial. Helping under-

represented or marginalized populations prevent the 911 call is a means of promoting social justice within the community.

Chief fire officers must understand that communities generally have positive perceptions of fire & EMS, but also that those perceptions are tenuous and could be damaged by a single lapse in judgment. Enmeshing their agency within the fabric of the community will provide shared awareness and understanding to prevent such damage from occurring. Chief fire officers must also be aware of the political atmosphere within the community and their agency. Chief fire officers should actively work to cross political lines, both internally and externally, to ensure a socially justice service provision.

Finally, chief fire officers should evaluate the lessons learned through the COVID-19 pandemic. They must understand that healthcare disparities exist, as exposed during the COVID pandemic, and work to eliminate them from their communities and agencies. Long commutes have become commonplace in many urban fire & EMS agencies, leading to community detachment for some personnel. Participants identified the importance of community involvement in recognizing and connecting with under-represented and marginalized populations. Chief fire officers should work to ensure all members are personally vested in the community they serve, regardless of where they live.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Study participants provided copious data in answering the interview questions. The sheer amount data proved to be a limitation in the study, restricting further exploration of any single topic. Future research should capitalize on this ample data as an opportunity to select a specific area to investigate and build a research study focusing on that one specific area. With 6 themes, 17 subthemes, and 48 coded meaning units, there are abundant topic areas ripe for exploration.

Study participants briefly discussed the financial impact of social injustice, but the topic was not well explored and therefore not included in the study. Future research could build on this limited data to explore the financial impact in terms of legal liability, missed opportunities for community partnerships, or recruitment and retention failures. The omission of financial data from the study can be attributed to the qualitative research design, which focused on the lived experiences of study participants. Future research could pursue a quantitative design, such as seeking statistical data or financial reports to examine the economic toll of injustice.

Study participants identified the need for fire & EMS agencies to be more involved in their communities. Some participants described this as becoming part of the fabric of their communities. This topic is rich in research opportunities. For example, future research could explore the ways in which fire & EMS leaders can assess the social justice standing of their communities or explore methods of engaging marginalized and under-represented populations.

Study participants described the mental health impacts of social injustice. The mental health of first responders is already a key area of emerging research, providing an opportunity for future research to connect mental health and social justice. For example, future research could seek to assess the mental health impacts of social injustice and how best to mitigate those impacts.

Study participants advocated passionately for proactive cultural change within the Fire & EMS Service. Creating a safe space to facilitate difficult conversations was considered a key element of fostering proactive change. Yet participants did not provide clear guidance on how to create a safe space. This topic area is ready for further exploration. For example, future research could identify best practices for creating safe spaces, develop methods of facilitating difficult

conversations within safe spaces, or build programs to train chief fire officers in creating an environment conducive to difficult conversations.

Social justice within the Fire & EMS Service is a field ripe for study. The study participants scratched the surface of many topic areas, opening them to the light of day, but leaving ample room for future research and exploration. Study participants expressed hope that this research project would lead to a national conversation and igniting the spark of future research would certainly fulfill part of that hope!

### **Conclusion**

The research results, conclusions, and recommendations in this capstone research paper represent hours of deeply personal conversations with highly accomplished chief fire officers from across the United States and Canada. These conversations attempted to answer the research question “how do chief fire officers perceive the influence of the social justice movement that arose following the death of George Floyd.” The chief fire officer participants resoundingly answered that they are aware of the social justice movement. They are aware of its influences within the community and within law enforcement. They are also aware that the influence of the social justice movement has been limited within the Fire & EMS Service.

The study participants described the current state of social justice within fire & EMS and identified barriers to its progress. They presented wide ranging solutions to break down barriers and advance social justice within the Fire & EMS Service. Study conclusions and recommendations emerged from the rich data collected in each interview. Ample opportunities for future research are available and supported through the plentiful data the participants provided. The Fire & EMS Service will benefit from the determination of each chief officer participant to make themselves vulnerable enough to provide meaningful yet challenging interviews.

The chief fire officers participating in this study are to be commended. Interview questions challenged each participant to examine their own feelings and perceptions. All participants shared deeply personal reflections freely with the researcher. There was a keen awareness of the faith and hope placed upon the study to deliver valuable results and bring about effective change. This researcher acknowledges the chiefs who shared so much of themselves and expresses thanks for their dedication to advancing our shared profession! In their honor, with faith and hope, this capstone research paper is presented.

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## APPENDIX A

<b>Participant Demographics</b>
Current Position:
Years in Current Position:
Years in an Officer/Leadership Role in the Fire/EMS Service:
Total Years Fire/EMS Experience:
Highest Educational Achievement (High School, Undergraduate, Graduate, etc):
Age & Gender:
Participation in Fire/EMS Service Organizations (IAFC, ISFSI, etc):
Certifications/Credentials (NFA Executive Fire Officer, CPSE Chief Fire Officer, etc):
Fire/EMS Agency Type (Career, Volunteer, Combination, etc):
Fire/EMS Agency Size (Stations, Personnel, etc):
Fire/EMS Agency Community Type (Rural, Suburban, Urban, etc):
Fire/EMS Agency Geographic Region (Pacific Northwest, Southern, Midwest, etc):

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Interview Guide**

1. Describe your understanding of the current social justice movement that arose following the death of George Floyd.
2. Describe your understanding of the influence of the current social justice movement on allied public safety partners such as law enforcement or mental healthcare providers.
3. Describe your understanding of the influence of the current social justice movement on the Fire & EMS service.
4. Where there are differing levels of influence between Fire & EMS and our public safety partners, do you have thoughts on why those differences may be happening?
5. Consider aspects of the Fire & EMS service that are experiencing little or no influence from the current social justice movement and explain why you believe that may be happening.
6. Discuss where, in the future, the Fire & EMS service may experience social justice influences.
7. Discuss areas in which the Fire & EMS service could improve culture, practices, or policies to incorporate the ideals of the current social justice movement.
8. Explore any additional thoughts or considerations you may have regarding the current social justice movement and the Fire & EMS service.