

Sources of Job Stress in Police Work in a Developing Country

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Abstract

An attempt was made to determine which job events are perceived as significant sources of stress in police work. The Police Stress Inventory was developed based on the interviews with police staff and experts in police administration for this study. The questionnaire was administered to a random sample of 220 police personnel. The respondents rated the job situations as least stressful (0%) to most stressful (100%). They consider the organizational and social aspects of their job are more stressful especially round the clock duty, lack of time for family, political pressures from outside and inadequate facilities. Results indicate that stress is due more to organisational factors than to physical hazards on the job. Efforts should be made by police administration to take corrective measures such as changes within organization and improving training programs. Efforts should be made by police administration to take corrective measures such as changes within organization and improving training programs.

Keywords: job stress, police personnel, developing country, implications

1. Introduction

There is an increasing preoccupation with stress within workplace (Collin & Gibbs, 2003). Research has implicated job stress as an important causal agent in health problems such as coronary heart disease, gastro-intestinal malfunction, dermatological problems, severe nervous conditions, insomnia, and increased levels of destructive stress hormones, post traumatic stress disorder suicide and other physical problems (Ramachandruni et.al., 2004; Karen et.al., 2006; Kivimak et.al., 2006; Violanti, 2008; Wang, 2007).

Human service professions such as medicine, social work, nursing, teaching, public safety, child care and occupational therapy are viewed as high stress occupations (Cherniss, 1980). Individuals in these professions work intensively, intimately and continually with people who have serious physical, mental, emotional and social problems. Every person is subject to stress, police staff are at greater risk than other people (Mc Cafferty et.al., 1990). Police work is considered as most stressful occupation (Sever & Cinoglu, 2010; Buker & Wiecko, 2007; Volanti et.al., 2006; Yesilorman, 2003; Liberman et. al., 2002; Burke, 1993; Crank & Caldero, 1991; Coman & Evans, 1991; Sigler et.al., 1991; Kroes, 1976). Police work is regarded as inherently stressful because of the personal risk of exposure to confrontation and violence and the everyday involvement in a variety of traumatic incidents (Collins & Gibbs, 2003) Several authors opine that job stress is the crucial problem confronting police officers. (Selye, 1978; Fell et.al., 1980; Kroes, 1976; Kroes, et.a.l,1974; Silbert, 1982; Stratton, 1978a).

Higher rates of morbidity and mortality was observed in police work force than in many other occupations due to job stress (Doctor et.al 1994).The police staff have poor health (Cooper & Davidson, 1987; Fletcher, 1988; Kirkcaldy et.al., 1995), frequently absent from work (Wright & Saylor, 1991) and experience burnout (Brown et.al., 1996; Burke & Deszca, 1986; Crank et.al., 1995; Lord 1996; Stotland & Pendleton, 1989). The police personnel are found to be dissatisfied with their jobs (Norvel et.al., 1998). It has been found that because of their weak organizational commitment, police staff, may not fully invest themselves in their work (Kop et.al., 1999; Malloy & Mays, 1984; Stevenson, 1988). When these police employees have too much occupational stress they suffer from increased chronic stress, heart diseases depression, stomach disorders, alcohol and drug abuse, divorce and suicide attempts (Anshel, 2000; Biggam et.al., 1977; Dietrich, 1989; Lord, 1996; Walker, 1997; Blackmore, 1978; Chenet.al., 2006). Rates of depression were found to be higher in police than general

population (Chen et.al 2006). It was found that stress not only affect police staff, but also their families (Zakir & Murat, 2011; Sever & Cinoglu, 2010; Hawassy, 1994; Scrivner, 1994). The police officers relatively have high rates of suicide (Friedman, 1967; Kelling & Pate, 1975).

There have been many studies regarding the intensity, prevalence, sources and effect of stress among police staff (Aroon, 2000; Aldag & Brief, 1979; Bannerman, 1997; Brooks & Piquero, 1998; Geick, 1998; Hilgren et.al., 1976; Kroes et.al., 1974; Laufesweiler-Dwyer & Dwyer, 2000; Lord, 1996; Morash & Haarr, 1995; Morash et.al., 2006; Sewell, 1981; Silbert, 1982; Singleton & Teahan, 1978; Violanti & Aron, 1993, 1994; Washington, 1981; Wexler & Logan, 1983; Whitte & Marino, 1983). Research on police stress has not kept pace with the research on occupational stress in general (Ellison, 2004). Exaggeration of physical dangers of police work are regularly seen in the mass media particularly on television and in films. Paradoxically however, recent research suggests that stress is due more to organizational and psychological factors than to physical risks. Little or no attention is focused on job related stress that contributes to alcoholism, divorce, and suicide rates that are higher among police officers than among other occupational groups.

If a public opinion poll asked what type of work is most stressful, a large number of people would be likely to say "being a cop" (Maslach & Jackson, 1979). Police staff are exposed to many sources of stress and law enforcement is particularly stressful occupation (Alkus & Padesky, 1983; Anshell 2000; Anshell et.al., 1997; Paton & Violanti, 1997; Violanti & Aron, 1993, 1994). The debilitating stressors of police work have very serious implications including the impaired functioning of individuals and a deterioration of performance which can result in a corresponding deterioration in response to the needs of the community that the police are expected to serve (Davidson & Venno, 1980; Sewel, 1984). It is very important to understand the sources of police occupational stress and suggest strategies to reduce stress or if not assist police personnel in coping with them (Morsch et. al., 2006). An attempt is made to find the sources of stress among police officials in a developing country like India where the ratio of police and public is very low. Most studies on occupational stress have been conducted quantitatively. No qualitative research has been conducted (Beehr & Glazer, 2001; Glazer & Beehr, 2005). The present study tries to determine which stressors are most salient in police occupation. It aims to find out sources of stress and rank them in terms of importance viz most stressful to least one. This is relevant and necessary to develop prevention strategies.

2. Methodology

2.1 Sample

The sample consisted of 450 police personnel which included Inspectors, Sub-inspectors, Head constables and Constables belonging to both sexes. The sample was randomly drawn from six police ranges in Chennai city. Two hundred and forty one questionnaires out of 450 questionnaires were returned of which 220 were found to be usable yielding a response rate of 53.6 percent. Twenty one of these responses were excluded for analyses because they were incomplete. The final sample consisting of 220 individuals contained 201 men and 19 women. The mean age was 40.2 years and the standard deviation 7 years (range 23-57). Ninety percent of them were married. The bulk of the sample (66%) comprised of Sub-Inspectors. About 46% of the sample had studied only up to high school. An almost equal number (45%) of them were graduates. The respondents had been in service from 2 to 37 years with a mean of 17.6 years. Eighty percent of the sample belonged to the Law and Order branch. A substantial number of respondents (75%) were engaged in regular program of exercise ranging from once a week to everyday. More than ninety percent of the sample had not availed sick leave in the past month but the figure slumped to 67% while considering sick leave not availed in the past year.

Thus the typical respondents from this sample of police personnel was male, married, aged about 40 years, high school educated, engaged in a regular program of exercise once a week, had been employed for about 18 years and was currently working as Sub-Inspectors in Law and Order branch of Madras city police.

2.2 Instrument

In addition to demographic items, respondents completed the Police Stress Inventory (PSI). Developed specifically for this study, the PSI consists of 80 job situations that police officers are expected to encounter in the performance of their duties. Each job situation was derived from interviews with experts at the National Police Academy, Bureau of Police Research and Development and Police training College including several senior police officers in Madras city and from lists of specific situations and events in the literature that appeared to adversely affect police officers (Hilgren, et.al 1976; Kroes & Gould, 1979; Kroes, et.al, 1974; Kroes, et. al, 1974; Margolis, et.al., 1974). Based on the discussion and interviews with police officials and literature search 80 job situations were selected for this study.

Respondents were asked to rate (on a percentage scale) each job event, as “stressful”, according to the magnitude of stress they perceive to be associated with each job event. Evidence indicates that the PSI is both a valid and reliable measure of job stress among police personnel.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Stress Ratings of Police Job Events

Table 1 lists the 80 job events in order of their ratings from most to least stressful. All the 80 job events evoked very wide variations in response ranging from 0 to 100, indicating diversity of reactions to each item.

Table 1. Job events ranked from most to least stressful

JOB EVENT	N= 220		RANK
	Mean	S.D.	
Never off-duty or round the clock duty	53.83	33.21	1
Lack of time to spend with family	52.24	31.38	2
Political pressure from outside the department	48.95	28.85	3
Inadequate salary/facilities	48.85	32.38	4
Political pressure from within the department	48.37	27.16	5
Bandobust(Providing security to VIPs)	46.34	31.55	6
Public criticism of police	45.42	25.19	7
Court leniency towards criminals	44.92	27.66	8
Using poor quality equipment	44.59	28.02	9
Hostile witnesses	44.45	29.85	10
Excessive paper work	43.02	30.11	11
Legal loop holes leading to case dismissals, acquittals and unfavorable verdicts	42.76	27.98	12
Insulting experience on the job	42.25	31.07	13
Lack of recognition for good work done	41.55	24.65	14
Arresting an influential person	41.12	29.74	15
Insufficient staff to handle critical jobs	40.87	26.68	16
Strict departmental regulations	40.36	31.26	17
Ineffectiveness of the judicial system	40.15	25.62	18
Harassed by superior	39.51	30.39	19
Time pressure	39.30	27.61	20
Distorted, harsh reports by press	38.57	28.12	21
Indecent public view of profession	37.33	31.45	22
Dealt too many cases in a single day	37.05	26.46	23
Working with inefficient staff	35.77	27.60	24
Working against one’s best judgment	35.70	28.48	25
Doing non-police work	35.36	31.74	26
Blamed for other’s fault	34.76	27.68	27
Conducting raids	34.73	29.19	28
Inadequate support by the department	34.18	28.78	29
Influx of extremists	33.56	29.66	30
Lack of timely promotions	33.30	33.06	31
Job conflict (book knowledge vs actual situation)	33.23	26.04	32
Ill treatment of police in courts	32.89	27.18	33
Confrontation with aggressive mobs	32.65	28.24	34
Inadequate support from immediate superior	32.58	28.46	35
Risk of making errors	32.13	26.98	36
Doing” unpleasant tasks”	32.05	28.57	37
Given responsibility without the necessary authority	31.90	27.46	38

Table 2. Job events ranked from most to least stressful

JOB EVENT	N=220		RANK
	Mean	S.D.	
Wearing a uniform for long hours	30.96	28.05	39
Co-worker killed in the line of duty	30.90	29.60	40
Retaliation by offenders/powerful others	30.71	25.73	41
Threat to life	30.23	27.58	42
Difficulty in getting along with superior(s)	29.74	27.67	43
Using physical force	29.72	25.98	44
Communication and feedback problems within the department	29.44	24.76	45
Misuse of power by superior	29.41	30.26	46
Misuse of power by colleague	29.27	26.48	47
Responsibility for people	28.83	29.47	48
No clear guidelines regarding one's role or duty	28.20	25.87	49
Lack of participation in vital decisions	27.99	24.38	50
Working against caste, communal and /or religious sentiments	27.14	28.05	51
Lack of opportunities for updating knowledge	27.13	26.14	52
Ineffectiveness of the correctional system	27.08	26.79	53
Insubordination	26.77	26.12	54
Unfavorable government decisions/policies	26.00	25.06	55
Court appearances in off-duty hours	25.85	21.66	56
Under utilization of skills	25.64	24.12	57
Searching or frisking a suspect	25.63	24.21	58
Taking disciplinary action against subordinate	25.45	25.01	59
Gender discrimination in the department	25.35	24.88	60
Poor relations with co-workers	24.98	20.17	61
Assignment of new unfamiliar duties	24.67	21.02	62
VIP Security /Escort	24.09	21.49	63
Exposure of the injured/dead	24.00	20.92	64
High speed chases	23.93	21.50	65
Custodial death	23.28	20.19	66
Frequent changes from boring to demanding activities	23.02	22.94	67
Inadequate or poor supervision	22.76	21.42	68
Recidivism	22.44	20.82	69
Juvenile delinquency	22.26	21.22	70
Testifying in court	21.94	18.20	71
Opening fire	21.74	19.75	72
Grievous hurt while on the job	21.65	17.77	73
Harassed by colleague	20.48	19.14	74
Exposure to people in pain	19.20	18.14	75
Minor physical injury while on the job	19.04	16.74	76
Physical assault on self	18.20	17.09	77
Handling fire arms	17.37	16.41	78
Exhumation	14.49	13.11	79
Problems with other branches of policies	13.61	11.36	80

The two job events “never off duty or round the clock duty (Mean = 53.83) and lack of time to spend with family (Mean = 52.24)” are among the most potent sources of stress. Could it be because of the ratio of police personnel to public is very low in India, when compared to developed countries? The police staff work for more than 12 hours a day and they can be called to duty time even during holidays. Since police work is 24 hours duty and some of them are posted at the senior officers residences to provide services and security. They are forced to work for many hours in a day and thus a less number of staff are available provide service to the public. Because they have to work many hours they have very little time to be with family. This may result in strained relationships with family members, leading to alcoholism and divorce.

The political pressure from outside the police department is the third important source of stress. The police

personnel may be prevented from taking action against persons for criminal behavior because of their political connections (the ruling party may bring pressure on the police department to go slow or prevent from taking action). Inadequate salary / facilities is the fourth major source of stress followed by political pressure within the department. Providing security to VIPs and public meetings addressed by political and religious leaders is listed as the sixth major source. When the political and religious meetings are organized, police staff deployed to provide security. Many times there may be clashes in the meetings due to leaders' speeches. The police staff have to be very vigilant and tactful in dealing with masses.

Public criticism is another source followed by court leniency towards criminals, poor equipment and hostile witness. These are followed by other sources of job stress. The public criticism of police is the seventh major source of police stress. The mass media especially cinema depicts the police force in a very bad manner leading to poor public image. Court leniency towards criminals is the next major source of stress. The least stressful ones are problems with other branches of police, exhumation, handling fire arms, physical assault on self, minor physical injury while on the job, exposure to people in pain, harassed by colleagues, grievous hurt while on job, opening fire, testifying in the court and juvenile delinquency.

Overall out of 80 sources of job stress perceived by police personnel 40 of them can be categorized as organizational or work place problems. Workplace problems are distinct because they are related to organization. They indicate the troublesome features of the work organization. They include round-the-clock duty, no time for family, inadequate salaries / facilities, negative interaction with other police staff, poor equipment, no recognition, too many cases, insufficient staff and harassment. The present results are consistent with the findings of Morash & Haarr (1995), Wexler & Logan (1983), White & Marino (1983), Brown et. al., (1996), Crank et.al., (1995), Hurrell (1995), Kirkcaldy et.al., (1995), Edalwih (1980), Kroes (1985), Reinecke et.al., (2007), and Mathias et.al., (2010). The police staff have not mentioned the crime rate, population and the area they are serving as sources of job stress though in India these are most important aspects of police service.

The average policeman took pride in his work and in his special training. He perceived himself as and is in fact, a trained law enforcement specialist. Within this framework he develops a certain perception of himself, that of a *professional*. Psychologically, it is very threatening and uncomfortable when a discrepancy occurs between one's self-perception and one's perception by others. The officer perceives himself as a knowledgeable expert providing a vital service to the community, but he is often treated as if he is an enemy to the well-being of the community.

Though policemen face stressors common to other work groups, there is an additional important group of stressors not faced by other occupational groups. The very fact of being a policeman sets the officer apart from the rest of the community. Groups within society react to the policeman not as an individual but with a stereotype. Even off the job and out of uniform, the policeman must accept prejudice, fear, suspicion, and sometimes even hostility from large segment of society. Thus, police work becomes one of the few jobs which has a potent adverse effect on the total life of the worker. That is, the policeman's job affects his own personal social life, his family's social life, his children's perception of him as a father, etc. Finally, police work is among those very few occupations in which the employee is asked to risk his life and in which he may face physical danger at any time. These additional stressors not only have a significant impact of their own, but they likely serve to reduce the frustration tolerance necessary for handling other job stressors.

Therefore, from the point of view of the effective functioning of the police department, as well as the effective functioning of the policeman, serious attempts at reduction of specific job stressors are warranted. When stress is too much it may lead to burnout of the police staff. Burnout is likely to occur in human service professions such as social workers, nurses, teachers, lawyers, physicians and police officers. This is partly due to high stress environment, emotional involvement and outcomes that workers may be independent of the effort exerted by the working individual. In conclusion, there appear to be three broad ways of dealing with occupational stress. Firstly, majority of perceived sources of job stress are related to workplace problems, changes may be made within the police department to prevent stress and its effects. Secondly, improved training may alleviate stress by increasing self-efficacy and coping skills. Thirdly, departmental mental-health programs may be implemented to treat stress-related problems as they occur. The police organization can also introduce steps to improve the public image of police staff.

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