Police Stress and Strategies for Improvement: A Literature Review and Media Analysis

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Abstract

This work is on police occupational stress. It is written from a veteran police officer’s perspective and includes a literature review of scholarly articles and analysis of web sources. The author offers factors that contribute to police stress and strategies that might mitigate the occupational stress officers experience.

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Abstract

Police work is stressful, and law enforcement officers are indoctrinated to high levels of stress – internal and external – at the onset of their careers, and beyond. There is an interconnectivity between officer wellness and public safety, and how police agencies and communities benefit from healthy officers. Today’s police leaders understand the importance of a physically and mentally healthy workforce, and the ethical obligation to address occupational stress among staff. To validate this assertion, a contemporary examination of scholarly articles and an analysis of web sources offers factors that might contribute to police occupational stress, the impact stress has on an officer, their agency, and communities, and strategies police leaders employ to mitigate workforce stressors. The review of the literature indicates that organizational, operational, and personal factors such as work environment and external support systems contribute to, or exacerbate, occupational stress as well as a correlation between public safety and wellness policies and programs.

Police Occupational Stress

From academy training to the post-academy day-to-day, law enforcement officers have tremendous responsibilities that often require instantaneous decision making, critical thinking, and innovative solutions to complex and delicate problems. At work, officers think about, train for, and respond to high-stress and high-pressure scenarios such as family and domestic issues; abuse and neglect of children, elderly and disabled individuals; fatalities, and dangerous and violent situations. At home, officers think about how to make up for missed birthdays, family dinners, and how to navigate opposite schedules from their significant others. Frank \textit{et al.} (2017) assert that stress, emotional mileage, and danger are a part of police work. Furthermore, several different personal and professional outcomes are related to, or associated with, the level of stress officers frequently endure because of the nature of police work.

Literature Review

The literature and research regarding police stress are considerable, and the reviewed literature in this article offers three global perspectives on the topic. First, is a study from Universita di Tornio (Turin, Italy) on
occupational stress that aimed to examine stress levels and anxietal consequences at a large metropolitan police department in Northern Italy. Second, scholars at the University of Toronto analyzed the effect of stress and trauma on officer wellness in British Columbia, Canada. Third, researchers from the University of Maryland, Texas A&M University, and Sam Houston State University studied factors that affect stress among law enforcement officers in New York state.

In an occupational medicine journal on police stress, anxiety, and coping strategies, Acquadro Maran et al. (2015), suggest that occupational stress among law enforcement officers is related to the deterioration of their psychological health and social welfare. Researchers used qualitative and quantitative research methodologies – questionnaire and a Distress Thermometer – to capture stress data, assess stressors, and evaluate coping strategies of 617 Italian police officers. The study identified stress differences between male and female officers, with men experiencing more organizational stress and women experiencing more operational stress. Despite the stress experienced by both sexes, each exhibited effective stress coping strategies. Acquadro Maran et al. concluded that training and support were critical to navigating the rigors of police work for both sexes and how gender, position, and assignment is associated with a particular stressor.

Andersen et al. (2015), a scholarly law enforcement journal on police resiliency, mainly focused on the interconnection of training and elasticity among 297 Canadian law enforcement officers in British Columbia, Canada. Specifically, researchers examined how mental preparedness techniques might mitigate stressors officers face and the benefits these techniques have on officers and policy-makers. There is little argument by those in and out of the law enforcement community concerning stress an officer might face, and the research by Anderson et al. concluded that trauma could result from an officer’s exposure to stress. Moreover, the trauma officers are susceptible to can be physically and psychologically damaging. A proactive approach to addressing potential stress is critical to mitigating physical and psychological trauma while promoting an officer’s overall well-being. Researchers assert that post-stress treatment may be dilatory in reconciling officer stress and submits that an investment in research-based and empirically tested mental preparedness techniques and other similar programs is vital to work longevity and stress management.

Routledge Taylor and Francis Group published an article in its police and practice research journal that studied the work-stress axis among police officers. Researchers, Tsai et al., (2018), used quantitative data collected from 594 peace officers across 21 different New York state law enforcement agencies to study factors that affect officer stress. Specifically, researchers examined the association between dependent and independent variables, such as demographics, education level, rank, tenure, internal and external factors, support systems, and cumulative stress. The research methodology included structural, hypothesized, and empirical models to support a relational nexus between the previously mentioned variables and stress an officer experiences. Tsai et al. concluded that contributing factors to occupational stress among law enforcement officers indeed included demographics, environment, and exposure to peer support. Moreover, agencies with counseling services positively influenced how officers cope with stress, resulting in improved welfare and elasticity.

Media Analysis

A number of other-than-scholarly sources offer anecdotal and data-driven evidence regarding police stress. Notably, information from web sources is considerable, and an analysis of three web-based articles from reputable professional sources offers perspective. First, is an online publication from the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) that examined the relationship between officer wellness and officer safety across fifteen American law enforcement agencies. Second, Sciencedaily.com published a University of Buffalo study, which illustrated the impact of stress and trauma on an officer’s physical and mental health. Third, PoliceOne.com published an article authored by an American Military University faculty member on stress management and reduction in law enforcement.

In the joint publication, Practices in Modern Policing (2018), the U.S. Justice Department’s Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS), the IACP, and the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) studied officer wellness. They concluded that healthy officers in healthy communities are interrelated. The study
showed that policies such as wellness training, fitness programs, and peer support help officers adopt healthy lifestyles and mitigate occupational stress. The COPSet al. conclusion aligns with Acquadro Maran et al. (2015) study on police occupational stress, in which researchers concluded that training and support were critical to assuaging occupational stress.

According to ScienceDaily.com, a University of Buffalo’s (2008) study suggests that pressures experienced by law enforcement officers are precursors to many physical and mental health complications, including heart disease and post-traumatic stress disorder. The online article highlights the University of Buffalo’s work, Impact of Stress on Police Officers’ Physical and Mental Health, and cites a National Institute of Justice (NIJ) study that measured officer stress. The NIJ study found that officers over 40 years-old have a higher chance of experiencing cardiac issues, and the unpredictable and dangerous nature of police work is psychologically demanding to officers. Although the University of Buffalo’s work does not address strategies to combat occupational stress, it does conclude that intervention might assist officers in handling the stressors of policing.

By comparison, ScienceDaily’s article aligns with Andersen et al. (2015) work, which concluded that trauma could be physically and psychologically damaging to officers, and proactive intervention is critical to an officer’s physical and mental well-being. Andersen et al. work address a gap in the ScienceDaily article by offering strategies that might assist in mitigating officer stress. One such strategy is mentally preparing, predicting, and possibly preventing critical events through proactive activities. Doing so might mitigate an event or incident’s impact on officers vulnerable to stress, and these officers can better respond to and effectively cope with the consequences of occupational stress. Put simply, mental preparedness techniques, helps officers deal with stress by visualizing preparation measures, thereby reducing the effects of critical events and incidents. Another Andersen et al. finding suggests that post-stress intervention is less effective than pre-stress intervention when addressing an officer’s well-being; therefore, proactivity is dealing with stress is vital.

Michelle L. Besears, Ph.D., a PoliceOne.com contributor, had her article How Police Can Reduce and Manage Stress published in 2017. The article highlights the types and causalities of work-related and individual stressors, such as poor management, shift work, and changes in duties. Also, the article discusses the consequences of stress, such as PTSD, reduced efficiency, and physical health problems, while illustrating the importance of stress reduction and management strategies. Beshears’ article somewhat aligns with the Tsai et al. (2018), examination on cumulative officer stress, in which Tsai and other researchers assert that environment was one of many contributing factors to police occupational stress; other factors included lack of a support system, pre susceptibility to stress and preexisting physical, mental and emotional conditions. Although the Beshears’ article included stress reduction and management strategies, it lacked the quantitative data Tsai et al. included in their study. Tsai et al. used quantitative data from Delprino, O’Quin, and Kennedy’s (2000) study of the ‘Work and Family Services for Law Enforcement Personnel in the United States, 1995 to support its conclusion that officers who employ stress coping techniques are more effective in reducing and managing stress.

Improvement Strategies

Several theoretical frameworks, such as Agnew’s (2011) general strain theory and Cannon’s (1914) acute stress response theory, known today as Fight or Flight, might explain the reason some officers experience occupational stress. The literature on police stress indicates that occupational stress is concerning to law enforcement leaders, line-level officers, and community members. Personal and professional factors contribute to police stress and coping strategies that improve – or at least help mitigate – stressors vary depending on implemented programs and policies of a particular law enforcement agency (Hickman, et al., 2011; Burke, 2017; Bano, & Talib, 2017).

One such coping strategy is exercise. Officers find utility in exercise as a means to cope with workplace stress. MacMillan, et al. (2017) postulate that job-specific lifestyle interventions, such as physical fitness for first responders, decrease the risk of succumbing to job-related physical and mental health issues. In
their systematic review, MacMillan et al. determined that organizations with structured health intervention programs had better health-related results compared to organizations that do not employ such programs. Therefore, one strategy to consider for improving police occupational stress is having wellness programs that incentivize officers to exercise.

Law enforcement leaders champion wellness policies to help mitigate and deal with officer stress. Wellness and self-care policies that address social support and healthy lifestyles are critical to an effective and healthy workforce. Policies based on quantitative and qualitative studies, such as the Safety & Health Improvement: Enhancing Law Enforcement Departments (SHEILD), reduce occupational risk, stress, and unhealthy lifestyles, which exacerbate stress among police officers (Kuehl et al., 2016). Accordingly, another strategy that might mitigate stress among officers is the implementation of wellness policies throughout the law enforcement community.

Family members play a critical role in stress management, and unstable family support results in work-family conflicts, which adversely affects an officer’s physical and mental well-being (Griffin & Sun, 2018; Kinman et al., 2012; Ola & Mathur, 2016). Irrespective of industry, one of the strongest foundations of successful employees, appears to be strong familial support. Law enforcement officers have the potential to experience physiological and psychological stress at a far higher rate than most in other industries. This is mostly due to environmental factors, such as shift work, outcome unpredictability, and occasional violent encounters. Although officers are trained and equipped to handle these situations, Griffin and Sun (2018) assert that familial support alleviates potential work and family-related conflicts. So, it is logical for law enforcement leaders to develop policies and programs that incorporate familial support as a means to help improve officer stress.

Conclusion

Organizational, operational, and personal factors contribute to or exacerbate, occupational stress, and there appears to be a correlation between public safety and officer wellness. Police wellness policies and programs not only impact the officer, but also their agency and the communities they serve. Business ethics and federal statutes suggest that employers have a moral and legal obligation to protect their employees and provide them as safe a work environment as possible.

Police leaders are faced with a cost conundrum – their obligation to provide a reasonably safe working environment through wellness policies and its cost. There is both tradeoff and opportunity cost associated with police stress, and law enforcement leaders face a choice between the financial cost or public safety cost. There is no cost-effective way to put in place these types of policies; however, according to Griffin and Sun (2018), proper budgeting and outreach to philanthropies and corporations can help offset financial burdens to agencies. In the end, today’s police leaders understand the importance of mitigating occupational stress, and most police agencies have some system in place to help officers cope with their stressors.


