A study on occupational stressors among civil police officers of a subdivision of Thrissur district

Joe Abraham[1], John George T[2], Vidhu M Joshy[2], Jenyz M Mundodan[3]

[1]Department of Community Medicine, Pushpagiri Institute of Medical Sciences, Tiruvalla, Kerala, India, [2]Department of Community Medicine, Amala Institute of Medical Sciences, Thrissur, Kerala, India, [3]Department of Community Medicine, Government Medical College, Idukki, Kerala, India

Correspondence to: John George T, E-mail: georgejohn37@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Background: Occupational stress among police officers is an extensive but neglected issue due to number of negative consequences on an individual as well as the police department. Policing is a highly demanding work environment, with constant threat to life, uncertainty at work, encounters, political pressure, exposure to violence, and death. **Objectives:** The objective of the study was to identify the occupation-related stressors faced by civil police officers in a subdivision in Thrissur. **Materials and Methods:** A cross-sectional study was conducted among civil police officers in Irinjalakuda subdivision, Kerala, from January 2017 to October 2018. The study population consisted of all civil police officers from the subdivision. Data were collected using a pre-tested structured questionnaire, which included sociodemographic variables and self-reported physical morbidities. Occupational stressors were measured using operational and organizational police stress Questionnaire. The data obtained was coded, entered in Microsoft Excel sheet and analyzed using the statistical software, Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version-23). **Results:** Nearly three-fourths of the participants were males and the mean age of the participants was 39.94 ± 7.067 years. Eight operational stressors were found to have a median value above four, while a median of five organizational stressors was found to be above four. "Fatigue" and "friends/family feel the stigma associated with job" were the most commonly quoted operational stressors while "staff shortages" and "bureaucratic red tape" were the most commonly quoted organizational stressors. **Conclusion:** Modifications such as sharing work and allotting fixed duty hours should be done to avoid stress and its adverse effects. Stress management training can be given at regular intervals to improve competency and enhance coping skills.

KEY WORDS: Law Enforcement; Operational Stress; Organizational Stress; Police; Workplace

INTRODUCTION

Work-related stress is the response people may have when confronted with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope up with.[1] Workers who are stressed are very much likely to be unhealthy, poorly motivated, less productive, and less safe at work. Policing is widely perceived as a highly stressful occupation and working in this environment makes officers vulnerable to adverse physiological and psychological outcomes.[2] Police being the gatekeepers of the criminal justice system are expected to implement "zero tolerance" order maintenance strategies. However, with evolving community policing philosophy, they are expected to respond to a variety of political pressures, forcing them to engage in community development as well.[3]

Stress can be both positive and negative. Stress is considered to be positive when the situation offers an opportunity for a person to gain something. Eustress is the term used to

describe this positive stress. Eustress can act as a motivator for a person to attain peak performance. Stress is said to be negative when a person faces social, physical, organizational, and emotional problems.[4] In the organizational setting, this injury or aversive stimuli may arise from the structural characteristics of, or adverse experiences in the place of work that upset the usual operating environment a person is accustomed to, which leads to pessimistic behavioral, physiological, and psychological responses. Inside a police department, this aversive stimuli may derive from the organization's design (bureaucratic and hierarchical), as well as life within this structure.[5]

Workplace problems are distinct from other stressors that a person would normally face. They would include difficulties in balancing a job and family responsibilities or with a person's personality traits. Workplace problems are bothersome features of the work organization. They include negative interactions with other police officers in the department, feelings about opportunities and status in the department, bias and harassment, and overestimation and underestimation of one's abilities.[6]

Many studies have shown that prolonged stress has a negative impact on an individual's physical well-being such as coronary heart disease and its risk factors such as hypertension, high cholesterol, and obesity.[7] This could, in turn, affect employees' attitudes toward the organization.[8] Continuously, stressful conditions under which law enforcement officers are working, would only lead to dissatisfaction and concurrently, exhaustion. Both their work related and physiological well-being is affected by these conditions. The impact of work-related stress can act exponentially on professional relationships and its major outcome is burnout among police officers.[9] This burnout influences an officer's interaction with the public, especially their use of violence toward the general public.[10] This also influences their interaction with their own family members.[11]

In their line of duty, police officers might have to witness events which no other citizen would witness normally, like seeing a dead body or killing someone or witnessing one's colleague getting killed during duty.[12] Officers are constantly exposed to the inequities and brutalities of life. In certain situations, they are expected to control their emotions even when they are provoked. Such experience takes its emotional toll on even the well-adjusted individuals. There is also an absence of closure as the opportunities for follow-up of a case is very limited and there are very low chances for feedback.[3]

Police departments are bureaucracies with very inflexible hierarchical power structures, where the most degree of control resides at the top of the organization. It would seem that employees at the lowest level of the organization, who have the highest difficulty and the least amount of control, may suffer from the highest levels of stress.[13] Even though

crime and violence have always been part of the job, many officers do not feel they have an upper hand anymore, especially when they are sometimes pitted against heavily armed criminals. In many areas, the staff pattern and number have not yet been revised in accordance with the increasing population and demands.[3]

The stressed police officers pose a threat not only to themselves but also to their colleagues, offenders, and to public safety as well. In policing, primarily, two sources of stressors are identified. The first concerns with the inherent dangers of law enforcement work. The second pertains to the distinctly bureaucratic nature of most police organizations.[14,15] Police officers interact with anti-social or the most violent or the criminal elements of the society on a regular basis. There is a persistent threat of being exposed to danger. This constant unpredictability places police officers under a considerable amount of stress. This constitutes the inherent danger of the work.

Primary structural arrangements of the conventional police organization such as austere chain of command, narrow span of control, and ample number of impersonal rules serve to stifle individual originality and hinder the maturation of skills and judgment. These obstructions to employee self-expression and self-actualization, in turn, have a major negative impact on the psychological and mental health of police personnel. This bureaucratic nature of the police organization is the other source of stress.[16] This constitutes the operational and organizational stressors.

The major brunt of this job is borne by civil police officers as they are the foot soldiers of police in India. They have to deal with angry mobs, counter-insurgency operations, traffic control, VIP security, political rallies, religious festival crowd control, and various other law and order duties without losing their composure and sensitivity. Hence, high can be the stakes that the entire life of police officers is full of tension and stresses. Therefore, physical fitness is not the only criteria, but each personnel should also be mentally fit to do full justice to their duties. Considering the difficult nature of police work and the stress it places on individuals, there is a strong need to understand the stress faced by policemen and the various factors associated with it. The current study aims to study police specific stressors among civil police officers of a subdivision of Thrissur district.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Thrissur district consists of five police subdivisions. Of these, Irinjalakuda subdivision was randomly selected. Irinjalakuda subdivision comprises ten police stations. Based on a study done in Vizianagram by Kaur *et al.*[17] sample size was calculated to be 205. The study population consisted of all Civil Police Officers from the subdivision. This consisted

of a floating population, with officers working in different stations of the subdivision during the study period. From the study population, a number of officers proportional to the strength of each police station were selected until the calculated sample size was met. This cross-sectional study was conducted from January 2017 to October 2018.

A pre-designed, pre-tested, self-administered, and structured questionnaire was used for data collection, which was administered in the Malayalam language. Questions on sociodemographic profile, the background characteristics such as habits (smoking, smokeless tobacco, and alcohol) and history of any diseases were asked. The stressors were measured using organizational and operational police stress questionnaire.[18]

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Assistant Superintendent of Police, Irinjalakuda subdivision and clearance was obtained from the Institutional Ethical Committee. The informed and written consent were obtained from each of the study participants. The data obtained was coded, entered in Microsoft Excel sheet, and analyzed using the statistical software, Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS Version-23).

RESULTS

In the present study, 152 (74%) of the total of 205 police officers were males and 53 (26%) were females. Mean age of the participants was 39.94 ± 7.067 years. Over 42% (87) of the study subjects were in the age group 41–50 years. Years of experience of the study subjects ranged from 1 to 30, with the mean being 14 ± 6.550 years. Over 26% (54) of them had 11–15 years of experience. Majority of the participants were Hindus, who constituted 53.2% of the study population and 30.7% of the participants were Christians. Majority of the police personnel (52.2%) reported to have completed either diploma or degree as their educational qualification.

With regard to the use of habit-forming substances, 31.2% gave a current use of alcohol consumption while 43 were smokers. Only 4 of 205 subjects gave a history of tobacco chewing. Among the study subjects, 22 used both alcohol and smoking. Hypertension was reported in 35 (17.1%) of the study population. A total of 19 of the civil police officers had diabetes, while 10 reported to have asthma. A total of 23 of the study subjects placed themselves in the "others" category, which included chronic back pain, knee ache, and psoriasis [Table 1].

The responses for operational and organizational stress questionnaire were on a Likert scale of 1–7; with 1 being "no stress at all" to 4 being "moderate stress" and 7 being "a lot of stress." Median of the responses was arranged in ascending order. Eight operational stressors were found to have a

median value above 4, which were not enough time available to spend with friends and family, overtime demands, the risk of being injured on the job, paperwork, fatigue, negative comments from the public, feeling such as always on job and friends/family feel the stigma associated with job [Table 2]. Similarly organizational stressors were also arranged and median of five stressors were found to be above 4. They were staff shortages, excessive administrative duties, bureaucratic

Table 1: Health factors

Factors	Frequency (%)
Addictions	
Tobacco chewing	4 (2)
Smoking	43 (21)
Alcohol	64 (31.2)
Chronic diseases	
Hypertension	35 (17.1)
Diabetes	19 (9.3)
Asthma	10 (4.9)
Both diabetes and hypertension	10 (4.9)
Heart disease	3 (1.5)
Asthma and hypertension	2 (1)
Others	23 (11.2)

Table 2: Operational stressors

Operational stressors	Median	25th quartile	75th quartile
Not enough time available to spend with friends and family	6.00	4.00	7.00
Over time demands	5.00	4.00	6.00
The risk of being injured on the job	5.00	3.00	6.00
Paperwork	5.00	4.00	7.00
Fatigue	5.00	4.00	6.00
Negative comments from the public	5.00	3.00	6.00
Feeling like always on job	5.00	3.00	6.00
Friends/family feel the stigma associated with job	5.00	4.00	6.00
Shift work	4.00	2.00	6.00
Working alone at night	4.00	2.00	6.00
Work-related activities on day off	4.00	2.00	6.00
Traumatic events	4.00	2.00	5.00
Finding time to stay in good physical condition	4.00	2.00	5.00
Occupation related to health issues	4.00	3.00	6.00
Lack of understanding from friends and family about work	4.00	2.50	6.00
Limitations to social life	4.00	2.00	5.00
Managing social life outside of work	3.00	2.00	5.00
Eating healthy at work	3.00	2.00	5.00
Upholding a "higher image" in public	3.00	2.00	4.00
Making friends outside of work	2.00	1.00	4.00

red tape, dealing with the court system, and the need to be accountable for doing job [Table 3].

Among operational stressors, 83.4% (171) of the respondents marked a score of 4–7 for the stressor "fatigue." For the stressor "friends/family feel the stigma associated with job," 82.9% (170) respondents gave a score of 4–7. Among organizational stressors, 89.8% (184) of the respondents marked a score of 4–7 for stressor "staff shortages." For the stressor "bureaucratic red tape," 81% (166) respondents gave a score of 4–7 and for the stressor "dealing with the court system," 78% (160) respondents marked a score of 4–7 [Table 4].

DISCUSSION

Over 30% of the respondents gave a history of alcohol consumption. Regarding chronic diseases, hypertension was reported in 17.1% of the study population while diabetes and asthma were reported among 19 and 10 civil police officers, respectively. Eight operational stressors and five

Table 3: Organizational stressors

Organizational stressors	Median	25th quartile	75th quartile
Staff shortages	7.00	5.00	7.00
Excessive administrative duties	5.00	3.00	6.00
Bureaucratic red tape	5.00	4.00	7.00
Dealing with the court system	5.00	4.00	6.00
The need to be accountable for doing job	5.00	3.00	6.00
The feeling that different rules apply to different people (e.g., favoritism)	4.00	2.00	5.00
Constant changes in policy/legislations	4.00	3.00	6.00
Too much computer work	4.00	3.00	5.00
Inconsistent leadership style	4.00	2.00	5.00
Lack of resources	4.00	3.00	5.00
Unequal sharing of work responsibilities	4.00	3.00	6.00
Inadequate equipment	4.00	3.00	6.00
Feeling that you always have to prove yourself to the organization	3.00	2.00	4.00
Lack of training on new equipment	3.00	3.00	5.00
Dealing with supervisors	3.00	2.00	5.00
Leaders over-emphasize negatives	3.00	1.00	4.50
Internal investigations	3.00	2.00	5.00
Dealing with coworkers	2.00	2.00	4.00
Perceived pressure to volunteer free time	2.00	1.00	4.00
If you are sick or injured your coworkers seem to look down on you	1.00	1.00	3.50

organizational stressors were found to have a median value above 4. Among operational stressors, "fatigue" and "friends/family feel the stigma associated with job" were most frequently quoted while among organizational stressors, the most frequently quoted were "staff shortages," "bureaucratic red tape," and "dealing with the court system."

In the study conducted by Parsekar *et al*. in Udupi, Karnataka, the main operational stressor was "not enough time available to spend with friends and family." Other top stressors were occupation-related health issues, overtime demands, fatigue, and finding time to stay in good physical condition, in that order.[19] In another study done by Suresh *et al*. "overtime demands" and "lack of time to spend with family" were the topmost stressful activities.[20] In the study by Parsekar *et al*., the major organizational stressors were staff shortages, excessive administrative duties, too much computer work, lack of training on new equipment, and inadequate equipment.[19] A similar study conducted by Kores *et al*. in the United States, identified administration, job overload, court-related matters, role conflict, role ambiguity, unusual work hours, and line of duty crisis situation as the stress-causing factors in police personnel.[21]

Kerala police have strength of more than 55,000 personnel serving over 14 districts of the state. However, not many studies have been conducted among police personnel of Kerala so far. Hopefully, the results from this study can lead to policy recommendations. The sample size was taken from one subdivision only, and thus the results cannot accurately predict the outcome for the entire police force but gave an idea of the trend. Hence, to extrapolate the results, more of such studies should be conducted in other areas. The desire

Table 4: Frequency of selected operational and organizational stressors (*n*=205)

Stressors	Frequency (%)
Operational stressors (Scores 4–7)	
Fatigue	171 (83.4)
Friends/family feel the stigma associated with job	170 (82.9)
Not enough time available to spend with friends and family	169 (82.4)
Over time demands	163 (79.5)
Paperwork	155 (75.6)
Negative comments from the public	153 (74.6)
Feeling like always on job	146 (71.2)
The risk of being injured on the job	144 (70.2)
Organizational stressors (Scores 4–7)	
Staff shortages	184 (89.8)
Bureaucratic red tape	166 (81)
Dealing with the court system	160 (78)
Excessive administrative duties	146 (71.2)
The need to be accountable for doing job	139 (67.8)

of the subjects to present themselves in a positive light makes desirability bias very likely.

CONCLUSION

More police employees should be recruited and effective training and motivation at lower level should be given. Better human resource and human relationship management will remove the hindrances in creating healthy work culture. Effective training programs to handle crowds and using of new technical components should be given. Reducing paper works (implementation of information systems), flexible timings, work based on preference, gender, and experience will help the police constables to control stress. Among the police force, a holistic approach to stress reduction must consider operational and organizational stressors. There must be an institutional commitment to provide stress management training, and it should be given at regular intervals to improve competitiveness, foster cooperation, enthusiasm, initiative, and enhance coping skills. Modifications such as sharing work, fixed duty hours, should be done in the police department to avoid stress and its adverse effects.

REFERENCES

1. World Health Organization. Work Organisation and Stress. Protecting Workers Health. Vol. 3. United Kingdom: World Health Organization; 2003. p. 1-27.
2. Hartley TA, Violanti JM, Mnatsakanova A, Andrew ME, Burchfiel CM. Military experience and levels of stress and coping in police officers. Int J Emerg Ment Health 2013;15:229-39.
3. Finn P, Tomz JE. Developing a Law Enforcement Stress Program for Officers and Their Families off Justice Programs; 2016. Available from: https://www.nij.gov/funding/Pages/welcome.aspx#findafundingopportunity. [Last accessed on 2013 Jul 10].
4. Chandramani JS, Chavan CR. Study of stress among Mumbai police force and its impact on their personal and professional life. Res Insight 2015;1:183-99.
5. Shane JM. Organizational stressors and police performance. J Crim Justice 2010;38:807-18.
6. Morash M, Haarr R. Gender, workplace problems, and stress in policing. Justice Q 1995;12:113-40.
7. László KD, Pikhart H, Kopp MS, Bobak M, Pajak A, Malyutina S, *et al.* Job insecurity and health: A study of 16 European countries. Soc Sci Med 2010;70:867-74.
8. Cropanzano R, Rupp DE, Byrne ZS. The relationship of emotional exhaustion to work attitudes, job performance, and organizational citizenship behaviors. J Appl Psychol 2003;88:160-9.
9. Burke RJ, Martinussen M, Richardson AM. Job demands, job resources, and burnout among police officers. J Crim Justice 2007;35:239-49.
10. Kop N, Euwema M, Schanfili W. Burnout, job stress and violent behaviour among dutch police officers. Int J Work Health Organ 1999;13:326-40.
11. Wiese L, Rothmann S, Storm K. Coping, stress and burnout in the South African police service in Kwazulu-Natal. J Ind Psychol 2003;29:71-80.
12. Liberman AM, Best SR, Metzler TJ, Fagan JA, Weiss DS, Marmar CR. Routine occupational stress and psychological distress in police. Policing Int J Police Strateg Manage 2002;25:421-39.
13. Kain J, Jex S. Karasek's (1979) job demands-control model: A summary of current issues and recommendations for future research. In: New Developments in Theoretical and Conceptual Approaches to Job Stress. Bingley, United Kingdom: Emerald Group Publishing; 2010. p. 237-68.
14. Violanti JM, Aron F. Ranking police stressors. Psychol Rep 1994;75:824-6.
15. Malloy TE, Mays GL. The police stress hypothesis: A critical evaluation. Crim Justice Behav 1984;11:197-224.
16. Zhao JS, He N, Lovrich N. Predicting five dimensions of police officer stress: Looking more deeply into organizational settings for sources of police stress. Police Q 2002;5:43-62.
17. Kaur R, Chodagiri VK, Reddi NK. A psychological study of stress, personality and coping in police personnel. Indian J Psychol Med 2013;35:141-7.
18. McCreary DR, Thompson MM. Development of two reliable and valid measures of stressors in policing: The operational and organizational police stress questionnaires. Int J Stress Manage 2006;13:494-518.
19. Parsekar SS, Singh MM, Bhumika TV. Occupation-related psychological distress among police constables of udupi taluk, karnataka: A cross-sectional study. Indian J Occup Environ Med 2015;19:80-3.
20. Suresh RS, Anantharaman RN, Angusamy A, Ganesan J. Sources of job stress in police work in a developing country. Int J Bus Manage 2013;8:102-10.
21. Kroes WH, Margolis BL, Hurrell JJ. Job stress in policemen. J Police Sci Adm 1974;2:145-55.