

Running head: POLICE STRESS

The Effects of Police Stress and Reduction Strategies

Name

University

Date

(Not much to comment on here - just a basic APA title page format. You might check with your professor to see if there is anything special expected here)

Abstract

This paper examines the growing concern of how stress affects police officers. On-the-job police stress is defined and discussed in terms of severity and prevalence. This paper also examines theoretical aspects that may account for police stress. Stress reduction strategies are examined and the effectiveness of these strategies are reviewed.

(Abstract is another term for summary - your abstract should be short and concise. It should present the overview of your paper's contents to the reader. Per APA guidelines, an abstract is a maximum of 120 words. Another point to remember - the abstract is usually entered into a special database for search engines to hit on, so you will want to include terms that would help others locate your paper)

The Effects of Police Stress and Reduction Strategies

This paper will address two main concerns, 1) how stress affects police officers, and 2) recommended strategies for reducing police stress. This paper will begin by defining police stress and its various manifestations as it relates to police officers. Next, this paper will examine the prevalence and theoretical aspects that may account for police stress. The paper will then look at strategies that can be used to reduce police stress and a discussion of the effectiveness of these strategies. The significance of this paper is that it will identify negative effects of stress and offer strategies for stress reduction. This paper is written for colleagues and clerisy who have a professional or academic interest in police stress and stress reduction strategies.

Definition of Stress

Stress occurs when one perceives the demands of a situation taxes or exceeds one's ability to cope with those demands. Finn and Tomz (1997) provide a more clinical definition of stress as "a mentally or emotionally disruptive and upsetting condition occurring in response to adverse external influences, and a stimulus or circumstance causing such a condition" (p. 5). Stress behaviors include cynicism and suspiciousness, emotional detachment, reduced efficiency, absenteeism, excessive aggressiveness, alcoholism and substance abuse, marital problems, posttraumatic stress disorder, health problems, and suicide (National institute of Justice, 2000).

Prevalence of Police Stress

Nearly 100 percent of police will experience some form of stress in their careers (Anson and Bloom, 1988). To this end, Volanti (1996) reports that police divorce rates are twice the national average and police suicide rates are three times the national average. Constant exposure to stress for police officers comes in the form of the threat of violent death, injury, the constant exposure to human tragedies, assuming responsibility for others,

feelings of alienation and helplessness, exposure to contagious disease, and many other factors resulting from the demands of police work (Hunter, Barker and Mayhall, 2004).

How Stress Affects Police officers

Stress felt by police officers can negatively affect all aspects of one's life. A primary aspect of stress is that it can degrade the quality of life in an officer's home environment and set the stage for domestic abuse. Johnson (1991) reports that as many as 40 percent of police officer families experience domestic abuse compared to 10 percent of the general population families. Stress increases the risk of personal health problems of police officers in the form of heart attacks, high blood pressure, ulcers, weight gain or loss, sleep disorders, alcoholism, and other health problems (National Institute of Justice, 2000).

Police officers who suffer from stress tend to perform poorly at work. Stressed officers are more likely than other officers to have higher absenteeism rates, leave the profession earlier (through termination or early retirement), be the subject of more lawsuits, and garner more citizen complaints against them (Springer, 1995). McCraty, Tomasino, Atkinson, and Sundram (1998) aptly note, "Officers operating under severe and chronic stress may well be at greater risk of error, accidents and over-reaction that can compromise their performance, jeopardize public safety and pose significant liability costs to the organization" (p. 1).

Theoretical Framework

A literature review regarding stress reveals a wide range of stress causation. Brewin and Holmes (2003) account for police stress in psychological theories that involve role ambiguity, dissociation, stress response, defense and survival mechanisms, and conditioning theories. Paton, Smith, and Stephens (1998) report that work related psychological trauma is a result of a combination of personal and cognitive influences, social psychological influences, and the organizational environment. Others proffer recent theories such as the

emotional processing theory that forwards the concept that stress is based on accumulated knowledge of an unsafe world (Dalgleish, 1999).

The disparity in theories of stress causation indicates the vastness of the problem. While stress has many causes, most research tends to agree it is imperative that police stress is addressed in a meaningful way (National Institute of Justice, 2000). Reducing Police Stress

Two major strategies of addressing police stress are preventing stress and stress reduction programs (National Institute of Justice, 2000). The most common method to prevent stress is found in the training stage of a police officer's career. This involves training officers to recognize signs and sources of stress and to utilize stress reduction techniques and coping strategies (National Institute of Justice, 2000). Other stress prevention strategies include more comprehensive pre-hire screening, better supervision and management training for the command staff, and improving the match between the officer's capabilities and the demands of specific assignments (Hunter et al., 2004).

Stress reduction programs should be an essential part to any police organization. Employee assistance programs have proven to be of great value in stress reduction. Such wellness programs provide access to stress assessment and mental health practitioners, critical incident debriefings, crisis interventions, counseling, and substance abuse treatment (National Institute of Justice, 2000). Many wellness programs involve families and coworker support groups. These programs offer seminars on topics such as nutrition, stress reduction, physical fitness, financial planning, and other topics targeted at wellness (Hunter et al., 2004).

Effectiveness of Police Reduction Strategies

As expected, the vast definition of stress reduction produces a range of results. The HeartMath Institute provides Santa Clara County Police Officers training in self-management of stress reactions. The results of this training are measured physiologically in terms of the time it takes the heart rate to recalibrate and return to normal levels after participants were

subjected to simulated stressful scenarios. For clarification, the medical community is in agreement that it is important to cardiac health to achieve quick and deep recalibration of the heart rate following intense stress (Arnsten, 1998). The HeartMath study empirically demonstrated improvement in reducing the time of recalibration of the heart rate to normal ranges. As a result, 83 percent of the participants exhibited improved work performance, greater confidence, balance and clarity under acute stress (Mearns and Mauch, 1998). A National Institute of Justice (2000) study reported that group therapy involving police spousal couples confirmed evidence of decreased the stress levels of those who participated in the program when compared to a control group. As with most studies of stress reduction effectiveness, results are relative and difficult to quantify beyond increases and decreases of stress.

Conclusion

On-the-job police stress negatively affects police officers in terms of quality of life, the officer's family, the police agency, and the community. These Stresses occur when one perceives the demands of a situation taxes or exceeds one's ability to cope with those demands. Research indicates that stress is so prevalent that nearly 100 percent of police officers will experience stress during their careers and incorporate higher divorce and suicide rates than the general public. The effects of police stress account for increased domestic abuse, health problems, and work performance issues.

Stress reduction efforts generally consist of prevention and reduction strategies. Employee assistance programs (EAP) and wellness programs provide many of the recommended strategies for reducing police stress. Police officers and their families, the public, and police agencies significantly benefit as a result of reduced police stress.

References

Anson, R. & Bloom, M. (1988). Police stress in an occupational context, *Journal of Police Science and Administration*, 16, (4), 229-235

Arnsten, A. (1998). The biology of being frazzled, *Journal of Science*, 280,17111712.

Brewin, C. & Holmes, E. (2003). Psychological theories of posttraumatic stress disorder, *Clinical Psychology Review*, 23, 339-376

Dalgleish, T. (1999). Cognitive theories of posttraumatic stress disorder. In W. Yule (Ed.), *Post-traumatic stress disorders: concepts and therapy* 193220. Chichester: Wiley.

Finn, P., & Tomz, J. (1997). *Developing a law enforcement stress program for officers and their families*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice.

Hunter, R., Barker, T. & Mayhall, P. (2004). *Police-community relations and the administration of justice*, sixth edition. Upper Saddle River NJ: Prentice

Hall

Johnson, L. (1991). *On the front lines: Police stress and family well-being*.

Hearing before the Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families House of Representatives: 102 Congress First Session May 20, 32-48. Washington DC: US Government Printing Office.

McCraty, R., Tomasino, D., Atkinson, M. & Sundram, J. (1999). Impact of the HeartMath self-management skills program on physiological and psychological stress in police officers. Retrieved February 26, 2007 from: <http://www.heartmath.org/research/research-papers/police/index.html>

Mearns, J. & Mauch T. (1998). Negative mood regulation expectancies predict anger among police officers and buffer the effects of job stress. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 186, (2), 120-125

National Institute of Justice. (2000). On-the-job stress - Reducing it, preventing it, National Institute of Justice Journal, 1 , 18-25

Paton, D., Smith, L., & Stephens, C. (1998). Work-related psychological trauma: A social psychological and organizational approach to understanding response and recovery, The Australasian Journal of Disaster and Trauma Studies, (1), 1-4.

Springer, K. (1995). When the helper needs help: Stress and the law enforcement employee, Employee Assistance Program Association Exchange, 25, 6-11

U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice. (2002). Law enforcement and corrections family support: Development and evaluation of a stress management program for officers and their spouses, final report. National Criminal Justice Research Service: Washington D. C. NCJ-197900

Violanti, J (1996). Police suicide: epidemic in blue. Springfield (IL): Charles C Thomas Publisher