Research Article

A Study of Police Stress and Burnout among Tamil Nadu Police

Priya Xavier*, K.Prabhakar[1]
*Assistant Professor, SRM University, Kattankulathur, India.
[1]Professor, SRM University, Kattankulathur, India.
*Corresponding author's E-mail: priya.xavier@ymail.com

ABSTRACT

There is a strong consensus among police administrators that the police officers under their command are affected by daily exposure to human misery, pain, trauma and deviancy. There is enough awareness of the trauma police officers experience while dealing with a suspicious and hostile public. Issues facing police officers in their daily role as highly visible agents of justice system include moral dilemmas, challenges and frustrations associated with them. The exposure to continuous stressors and sometimes life threatening situations, may lead to police officers becoming burn out. This research will contribute to the paucity of research in psychological dimensions especially relating to law enforcement. It is inferred from this study that police officers face both administrative stressors and physical/psychological stressors in their occupation. Analysis found that administrative/ organizational stressors are contributing more to burnout compared to the nature of work. So its suggested that police administrators take serious measures to reduce the administrative sources of stress.

Keywords: Police stress, Burnout, Emotional exhaustion, Depersonalization, Personal accomplishment.

INTRODUCTION

Stress and burnout can be detrimental to police officers and their respective departments in a variety of ways.

Physical and psychological reactions to stress and burnout can intensify irritability, impair judgment, and drain energy necessary to perform essential tasks such as chasing suspects on foot and accurate report writing.[1]

The cumulative impact of individual-level stress and burnout carries the potential to generate organizational dysfunction from the effects of lagging officer performance, low morale, chronic absenteeism, and high turnover rates.[2-3]

These organizational problems, if left unresolved, can create productivity deficits as well as economic liabilities for police departments.[4]

Organizational stressors such as heavy workloads, inadequate supervisory support, staff shortages and poor communication are considerably more prevalent and problematic than acute operational stressors, such as attending accident scenes and apprehending violent individuals.[5-6]

Ongoing exposure to organizational stressors can have a negative impact on both the organization (e.g. lower levels of organizational commitment, increased absenteeism) and their members (e.g. reduced physical and mental health, declining job satisfaction).[7]

There is also a risk that community relations and public safety may be undermined by chronic job stress, with studies showing positive associations between levels of police burnout and cynical attitudes towards civilians and the use of self-reported violence.[8-9]

In view of the serious and far-reaching effects of prolonged occupational stress, there is a compelling need for policing services to have a sound understanding of the organizational origins of the stress experienced by their members and to use this information to develop well-informed and targeted stress prevention strategies.

A number of factors directly associated with law enforcement are identified as sources of stress and burnout, including the nature of the job requirements, police organizational structure and interactions with the public.[10-13] These areas are not mutually exclusive factors and stress in one area likely aggravates anxiety in another (He).

Research supports the idea that stress leads to a number of problems for both the individual employed in law enforcement and the policing agency as a whole. A number of social scientists have drawn connections between stress and problems with health related issues including increased anxiety and alcohol use, hypertension, insomnia, migraine headaches and heart disease. Stress also results in psychological concerns like burnout and fatigue. These responses may vary according to the officer's assessment of the situational demands and his or her ability to deal with the circumstances. Some research asserts that acute responses to stressful events, generally are associated with critical incidents, which are situations when an officer witnesses or is confronted with the potential for serious injury or death. Several work environment stressors are identified in the literature as critical incidents including shooting somebody in the line of duty, making a violent arrest,

responding to a gruesome crime scene or dealing with fatal accidents (He). Although police officers frequently face hostile citizens, life-threatening events rarely occur in policing.[14] In fact, few research work find that danger is not a significant cause of daily stress among police officers (Hart); however, critical incident stress also may occur when officers perceive stress-inducing events as situations that are beyond their immediate control. While critical incidents can result in acute psychosocial stress that may cause any number of short-term behavioral or psychological difficulties, chronic stress builds over time and frequently is related to the work environment, the nature of interpersonal relationships, issues associated with organizational structures and stressors inherent to the job requirements of policing. Nonviolent work–related stressors include shift work, overtime, negative time management, paperwork and physical requirements such as walking patrols and carrying heavy equipment. Problems of this type are more likely to compound and create chronic stress. Chronic stress may not immediately overwhelm the officer's coping ability, but over time it can result in negative consequences or overpower stress management skills. One consequence of chronic stress is the psychological concept known as burnout. In the police stress literature no universal term exists to describe stress or burnout. On the other hand, burnout can represent the cumulative influence of long-term stress and includes aspects of emotional depersonalization.[15] Several aspects of police organizations are identified as sources of elevated stress and burnout. These factors include frustration with the criminal justice system, departmental politics and lack of departmental support, concerns with the promotional process, poor training, and the bureaucratic nature of law enforcement (He). The size of the law enforcement agency may also influence the potential for stress and burnout. Most research on stress and burnout focuses on larger departments located in urban centers. Patrol officers from large departments generally have greater stress across a number of variables including organizational structure, administrative arenas, public demands, fear of danger and interactions with other areas of the criminal justice.[16]

Tamil Nadu Police

The Tamil Nadu Police Force is the law enforcing agency of the state of Tamilnadu, India. It is over 150 years old and is the fifth largest state police force in India. Tamil Nadu has a police population ratio of 1: 632. The administrative control of Tamil Nadu Police vests with the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu who holds the portfolio of Home Minister. The supervision and coordination of Police is done by the Home Department, Govt. of Tamil Nadu. The police force headed by the Director General of Police, is responsible for maintenance of law and order and prevention and detection of crimes. For administrative purposes, Tamil Nadu is divided into four zones-North, South, West and Central. Each Zone is headed by one Inspector General of Police.[17]

Methods

The subject for this study were 296 police officers out of which 102 officers were from North Zone of Tamil Nadu and were direct recruits. Remaining 194 were special sub inspectors from all four zones of Tamil Nadu police which include North, South, West and Central zones, who were well experienced police personnel. A brief demographic questionnaire was utilized, followed by the Police Stress Survey (PSS) and the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Human service survey (MBI –HSS). Correlation was used to analyze the relationship of police stress to burnout. Primary data was collected through questionnaire during the period from June 2014 to April 2015. Secondary data was also collected from various sources like text books, peer-reviewed journals, newspapers and police training academy library. The objective of this research is to find if there is a significant relationship between police stress and burnout.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The hypothesis tested in this research is as follows:

H_1. There is a significant relationship between police stress and burnout.

H_{01} There is no significant relationship between police stress and burnout.

Table 1: Correlation of Police stress with Burnout

Construct	Emotional Exhaustion	Depersonalization	Personal Accomplishment	Burnout (MBI)
Police Stress	0.256**	0.165**	0.167**	0.301**
Administrative/Organizational Pressure	0.310**	0.218**	0.152**	0.347**
Physical/Psychological threat	0.164**	0.072	0.160**	0.207**

**.Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

The above table, explained the relation between Police stress and Emotional exhaustion, Depersonalization, Personal accomplishment & Burnout.

Emotional exhaustion

All the constructs are positively related and statistically significant at 1% level.

Depersonalization

All the constructs are positively related and constructs like Police stress & Administrative/Organizational Pressure are statistically significant at 1% level.

Personal accomplishment

All the constructs are positively related and statistically significant at 1% level.

Maslach Burnout Inventory

All the constructs are positively related and statistically significant at 1% level. Police stress and Burnout is moderately related which is .301, and it is significant at 1% level. Within police stress, Administrative is better related with Burnout which is .339 while compared with Physical or psychological dimensions.

It is found that police stress is related significantly at 1% level to Burnout and its three dimensions . Within police stress, Administrative/Organizational pressure is related to all three dimensions of burnout namely emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment. While Physical/ Psychological threat is related to Emotional exhaustion and Personal accomplishment. Thus the alternative hypothesis is accepted and null hypothesis is rejected.

It is inferred that Administrative/Organizational pressure is contributing more to burnout compared to Physical/Psychological threat. Theory supports this finding e.g. Golembiewski and Burke (1994, 1997).

CONCLUSION

The research study found that police stress is leading to burnout. Police officers are more emotionally exhausted and depersonalized. Overall the administrative/organizational stressors are leading to burnout compared to physical/psychological pressures. So its suggested to police organizations to remove the organizational sources of stress.

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