

Examining stress and burnout for law enforcement criminology essay



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This paper explores stress and burnout for law enforcement officers and correctional staff, the various causes of it, the effects, and possible solutions. Both law enforcement officers and correctional staff are possibly the most stressful occupations, and stress is a constant factor and part of each of these jobs. There are numerous causes of stress that include shift work, excessive overtime, organizational structure, and family problems. The effects of stress can be tremendous on both law enforcement and correctional officers. It can affect their overall mental and physical health, as well as their quality of life. It can eventually even lead to burnout. Stress and burnout not only affect the individual, but also family and friends, co-workers, and the organization. Over the past years, numerous research studies have been conducted on stress in both the law enforcement field and corrections that report similar findings for the causes of stress and its effects. While not all stress factors for law enforcement officers and correctional staff can be eliminated, there are possible solutions for mitigating the effects of stress that can improve their lives, mental and physical health, lower their chances of suicide, decrease divorce, and decrease burnout.

Stress and Burnout for Law Enforcement and Corrections:

A look at the Causes, Effects and Possible Solutions

Stress and burnout occur in all different types of jobs and careers. However, some vocations are more prone to job stress and burnout than others are.

Both police officers and correctional officers are exposed to work environments that are characterized by high levels of stress. Stress and

burnout for both police officers and correction workers can greatly affect the field of criminal justice. According to Karen Hess (2009), stress can be both positive and negative, and this stress or excitement is why many police officers enter the law enforcement field (p. 464). Any given day, a police officer may have to shoot someone, be shot at, chase down a robber, deal with child abuse, and see death. Additionally, a correctional officer may also have to encounter a violent prison conflict or riot, encounter dangerous offenders and numerous other potentially dangerous situations. With the increasing prison population and never end sprees of crime, the stress for correctional officers and police officers is also increasing. Both law enforcement and the correctional field are widely considered some of the most stressful occupations, and both are associated with high divorce rates, alcoholism, suicide and other emotion and health problems. According to O. Ramos (2010), stress in the law enforcement field is unique because it is a constant factor with only changes in the degree and duration of the stress.

Over the years, numerous research studies and projects have been performed to investigate how stress affects police officers and correctional workers' physical and mental health by agencies such as the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health and the National Institute of Justice. Through this research and studies, researchers have been able to identify stress factors that are unique and more pronounced in these career fields, as well as their effects on the lives, jobs and the field of criminal justice.

Stress can have numerous causes and can differ from individual to

individual. According to Lambert, Hogan, Hiang, and Jenkins (2009, July), "<https://assignbuster.com/examining-stress-and-burnout-for-law-enforcement-criminology-essay/>

stressors are conditions that place excessive demands on an individual and can lead to discomfort, strain and conflict for the individual.” While both the police officers and correctional officers are frequently faced with high levels of stress, the causes of the stress differ between the two groups with the job differences they face.

Causes of Stress for Police Officers

Stress factors for police officers can vary from pressures of the job, attitude of the public towards police officers, the operation of the criminal justice system, the law enforcement organization itself and the officer’s personal life. According to Burke and Mikkelsen (2005), police stressors fall into two major categories. The first category stems from the nature of the job, and the second category involves the organizational aspect of law enforcement. The stress of the job involves the physical aspects of the job and includes threats, use of force, exposure to violence and danger, dealing with uncertainty, shift rotations, inadequate or broken supplies, low pay, excessive overtime, and constant fear of injury or death. On the other hand, the organizational aspect of law enforcement that contributes to job stress involve the poor management, inflexible hierarchical structures, roles, inadequate communication, and organizational structure (Burke et al. 2005). In fact, Burke et al. (2005) discusses how the bureaucratic nature of the law enforcement organization obstructs police officers from feeling as if they have input in changing the policies sand procedures. There is also conflicting policies, poor supervision, and endless rules that create a tense and stressful work environment.

McCarty, Zhao and Garland (2007) also discuss how job stress can differ between male and female police officers. For instance, female officers may be subject to gender discrimination from male officers and supervisors, which could increase their job related stress. Female officers also feel additional pressure that they have to prove themselves more on the job, as well as feel their male partners provide inadequate backup and question their abilities more frequently (McCarty et al., 2007)

Additionally, individual stress factors can play a factor in a police officer's stress levels due to their personal life. Some individual stress factors include family problems, financial problems, health problems, and taking on a second job for extra income. In fact, many officers are willing to put their health at risk for overtime or another job for the additional income (National Institute of Justice).

Causes of Stress for Correctional Officers

Correctional officers face some of the same and similar job stressors as police officers as well. Correctional officers have to deal with the never-ending demands of inmates. Correctional officers are also responsible for large array of responsibilities and duties to ensure the correctional facility is properly maintained in an organized manner. Aside from police officers, the workplace nonfatal violent incidents are higher per 1, 000 employees for correctional officers than any other profession (Finn, 2000, p. 2).

Additionally, according to Childress, Tallucci, and Wood (1999), while a correctional officer operates in a high stress work environment much like a police officer, there have been minimal examinations of the correctional environment in comparison to the voluminous research conducted on the <https://assignbuster.com/examining-stress-and-burnout-for-law-enforcement-criminology-essay/>

causes and consequences of stress for law enforcement officers. However, it has been determined that some of the job related stresses include inmate demands, low pay, excessive overtime, poor public image, shift rotations, threat of violence, understaffing, amount of contact with inmates, role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload. The major forms of stress in the work environment can be categorized into organizational structure and job characteristics

(Lambert, Hogan & Allen, 2006).

According to Lambert et al (2006), organizational structure deals with how an organization or agency is arranged, managed and operated, and it normally throughout the entire work environment and therefore influences all employees that work there. Lambert et al (2006) cite a study by Stohr, Lovrich and Wilson that the lack of participation in decision-making caused increased stress for correctional officers. Additionally, the lack of control over the work environment due to the centralization of decision-making can increase the levels of stress. In fact, Lambert et al (2006) performed a study at a Midwestern correctional facility that showed “ workers who perceived a lack of input into decision- making or a lack of job autonomy had increased levels of stress.” Furthermore, lack of information or being kept in the dark is another stress factor for correctional staff caused by the organization structure. Inadequate communication about their jobs is major stress factor. Correctional staffs need clear communication about their tasks, jobs, and issues in order to complete their job and be an effective member of the organization (Lambert et al, 2006). Additional organization-related conditions that can cause increased stress for correctional officers are understaffing, <https://assignbuster.com/examining-stress-and-burnout-for-law-enforcement-criminology-essay/>

mandatory overtime, understanding, and unreasonable demands. Finn (2000) describes how understaffing can create different types of stress such as lack of time to complete tasks, overload of work, apprehension, and inability to get time off (p. 12). Understaffing also causes the need for extensive overtime from the correctional staff.

On the other hand, there are job characteristics that cause stress. Job characteristics are specific to certain jobs; therefore, they are not always found throughout the entire field. Job related stressors included the threat of inmate violence, inmate demands, and problems with coworkers. Lambert et al. (2006) identify some job characteristics as job variety, skill variety, role conflict, role ambiguity, task significance, task identity, and supervision. The roles that correctional officers have to assume can create considerable stress for the officer. According to Lambert et al (2006), role strain is linked to increased stress and “ role conflict occurs when behaviors for a given job or position are inconsistent with another.”

Correctional officers also face stress from outside sources other than the prison or jail that they work at. One cause of outside stress is their public image. A lot of the time correctional officers or prisons and jails in general are portrayed in a negative light. This negatively comes from the fact that many people do not know or understand the role and jobs of correctional officers. Sometimes this negatively even forces correctional officers to discuss or talk less about their jobs with others. Another outside source of stress is their pay. Correctional officers do tough work for little pay.

Effects of Stress

Stress, whether caused from job characteristics, organization factors, shift changes, or family problems, it affects everyone differently. A person's stress tolerance depends on the frequency, severity, types of stress, personal aspects, past experiences, personal values and attitude, sense of control, personality, residual stress level and state of health (Schmallegger & Smykla, 2011, p. 321). Stress has great implications for anyone, and police officers as well as correctional staff are not immune to the effects of stress. According to R. Nauert (2008), "pressures of the badge put officers at risk for high blood pressure, insomnia, increased levels of destructive stress hormones, heart problems, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicide." Additional effects of stress can be high suicide rates, mental and physical health issues and relationship problems.

The National Institute of Justice (2009) states that enduring stress for long periods can lead to anxiety, depression or posttraumatic stress disorder in police officers. Posttraumatic stress disorder, also known as PTSD, is a type of anxiety disorder that can occur after someone has seen or experienced trauma. In fact, "it is estimated that one-third of law enforcement in the United States suffer from PTSD." (Hess, 2009, p. 465) Symptoms of PTSD include "diminished responsiveness to their environment, apathy, disinterest, pessimism, and diminished sex drive." (Hess, 2009, p. 465) Other mental health issues that stress can induce include increased mood swings, impaired judgment, decreasing an officer's adaptability to certain situations, heightening an officer's sense of threat, and increasing anxiety or depression (National Institute of Justice).

Some of these feelings and mental issues could lead to even suicide or thoughts of suicide. According to Childress et al. (1999), the clinical supervisor of the Rhode Island Department of Corrections' Stress Unit stated that correctional officers are three times more likely to commit suicide than they are to be killed on the job. Increased suicidal thoughts are also another implication of stress in police officers. In his article, R. Nauert (2008) discusses the research conducted by John M. Violanti, Ph. D., a research associate professor at the University of Buffalo. Violanti conducted a clinical examination of the affects of stress and indicated that the " data showed that 23 percent of male and 25 percent of female officers reported more suicidal thoughts than the general population (13. 5 percent)." (Nauert, 2008) Furthermore, Nauert (2008) indicated that Violanti's previous study that he performed showed that suicide rates were three times higher in police than in other municipal worker. This higher rate of suicide in law enforcement officers and correctional staff is alarming and shocking. In fact, according to Karen Hess (2009), police officers are eight times more likely to kill themselves than be a victim of homicide (p. 468).

However, suicide and mental health problems are not the only adverse outcomes that stress from police work can induce. Physical health issues can arise from the constant stress that police officers experience. Some physical health issues that may develop from increased stress include weight gain, inability to relax, insomnia, gastrointestinal problems, and damage to the cardiovascular system (National Institute of Justice). In fact, a study conducted by the University of Buffalo showed that officers over the age of 40 were at a higher 10-year risk for having a coronary event than the

national average and 72 percent of female officers and 43 percent of male officers have a higher than recommended cholesterol level (Page, D. 2010). Additionally, Page (2010) states that police officers as a group showed higher than normal pulse rates and diastolic blood pressure. According to Lambert et al. (2006), correctional officers have higher risks of hypertension, heart attacks, and other stress-related illnesses. In fact, Check and Woodruff reported, " correctional officers die far sooner than expected as compared to the national life expectancy, and stress is the leading reason for the shortened life expectancy." (as cited in Lambert et al., 2006) Emotional problems may also surface from the constant high levels of stress. Emotional problems could possible include increased irritability, feelings of tension, depression, and mood swings. Additionally, addictive behaviors such as gambling, overeating, or substance abuse may also emerge as a result of stress.

Stress and the effects of stress can also lead to family problems for both law enforcement officers and correctional staff. Both of these professions sometimes feel distant from their family, are not open about their jobs, and stress with their families.

Families themselves can also feel the effects of the stress with the long work hours, excessive mandatory overtime, and shift rotations, as well as also having the constant fear that something may happen to their loved one.

Stress could also be a potential cause of the high divorce rates. The divorce rate for police officers is double the national average (Hess, 2009, p. 468).

Correctional staff also have a higher than average divorce rate as well. In an interview with Officer Josh Taylor of the Escambia County Sheriff's Office, he <https://assignbuster.com/examining-stress-and-burnout-for-law-enforcement-criminology-essay/>

discussed how the dissolution of his previous marriage was partly attributed to his occupation as a police officer. Police officers sometimes feel distant from their family and do not want to share all aspects of their jobs and stress with their family. The stress and effects of stress can exacerbate an already strenuous marital relationship to its breaking point.

Burnout

Job stress and burnout may be used interchangeably. However, they are two distinct and different terms. Lambert et al. (2010) define job burnout as the “withdrawing emotionally, psychologically, and socially from the job, and generally results after prolonged exposure to stressors, including job stress, and/or the removal of valued resources.” According to Schmallegger and Smykla (2011), “when stress reaches an unbearable level, burnout can occur.” (p. 320) It is a physical and mental state that is caused by the severe strain and stress placed on the body (Burke, 2009). All with the effects of stress, the symptoms of burnout are gradual and differ from person to person. However, some symptoms of burnout may include lack of enthusiasms and interest, decreased job performance, short tempers, and loss of motivation (Hess, 2009, p. 466). Burnout can contribute to decline in work performance, withdrawal from others, and diminished work life. With the high levels of stress faced on a daily basis and the nature of their jobs, both law enforcement officers and correctional staff are susceptible to burnout. Burke et al. (2005) discusses the six areas of organizational life that is connected to burnout: workload, job control, rewards and recognition system, responsiveness to staff needs, respect and fairness, and fit of the individual and organizational values at work.

Lambert et al. (2009, July) discusses Cherniss' view on the three stages of burnout. The first stage involves an unfair distribution of work forces, demands and resources, resulting in an emotional and psychological strain on the worker. As a consequence of the strain for the worker, the next stage is where the strained worker treats co-workers and clients in an detached, impartial or insensitive manner. The final stage involves the strained worker feeling inadequate in dealing with others, retreating from others, and ultimately becoming detached, cynical and disengaged. Additionally, Maslach and Jackson (1981) argued that the three dimensions of burnout included emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced sense of personal accomplishment and theorized that work related stressors and organizational factors were primary cause for job burnout (as cited in Lambert, et al., 2009). In recent years there has been a small number of studies and research done on burnout in the criminal justice field. Lambert et al. (2009) discusses how research has examined whether personal characteristics were related to burnout, such as sex, age, position, tenure, education level, and race. According to Lambert et al. (2009), work environment factors, not personal characteristics, are more likely to contribute to burnout.

In law enforcement officers, burnout can affect the quality of service provided by a police officer and his inter-personal relationships. Burke et al. (2005) reviewed a small number of studies that considered the impact of burnout on the job behaviors of police and other service providers. It was found that burned out police officers were more likely to demonstrate a more negative mood, react to civilians more negatively, have reduced problem-solving skills, and increased likelihood of using force (Burke et al, 2005).

According to Jerry Carlton (2009, March), burnout is something that most in the law enforcement professional will experience at some point in their career. The dangers of burnout in police officers can be very real and dangerous for the individual with it affecting their job performance.

For correctional staff, researchers have found that some of the same job stressors, such as perceived dangerousness of job, increased contact with inmates, role overload, role conflict and role ambiguity have all been linked to burnout of correctional staff (Lambert et al., 2009). Burnout is a huge problem in the corrections field. In fact, Lambert et al. (July 2009), report that correctional employees have higher levels of burnout than the levels found in the general population, even higher than police officers. A study by Lindquist and Whitehead (1986) showed that approximately 33% of Alabama correctional officers in their study were suffering from burnout (as cited by Lambert et al., 2010). Additionally, a study by Hurst and Hurst (1997) demonstrated half of Kentucky correctional officers in their study were suffering from emotional exhaustion, a form of burnout (as cited by Lambert et al. 2010). Burnout is not only harmful for the correctional officer, but also the correctional agency or organization. Lambert et al. (July 2009) report that burnout can cause decreased work performance, withdrawal or reduced interaction with other employees, increased absenteeism, substance abuse and greater turnover.

Lambert et al. (2009, July) performed a study on the burnout rates at a private Midwestern maximum-security facility to examine the associations between burnout and contact with inmates, role conflict, role ambiguity, role overload, and perceived dangerousness. In this survey, out of the 160
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surveys that were completed, 18 percent responded that they felt burned out from their job, 26 percent responded they were emotionally drained to some degree at the end of the day from their job, 23 percent felt they had become insensitive to coworkers, 33 percent indicated they were less sympathetic, 13 percent felt they were not valued, and 12 percent felt they did not have positive influence (Lambert et al., 2009, July). According to this survey, tenure was the only one among the control variables that had a statistically significant relationship, and role ambiguity and overload also have a significant positive association with burnout for correctional staff (Lambert, et al. 2009, July). Lambert et al. (2009, July) suggests that the results show that correctional staff wants clearly defined roles and guidance and not to be overloaded in their assigned job tasks. Also, surprisingly perceived dangerousness of the job was not connected to burnout. According to Lambert et al. (2009, July), dangerousness may be expected and perhaps “may give some employees a sense of duty and even excitement rather than being stressed over it.” Contact with inmates was also not found to have a noticeable connection to the study; however, Lambert et al. (2009, July) note that it could be the type of contact and the need for additional research to be determined if it is associated with burnout.

Furthermore, work-family conflict can lead or contribute to burnout.

According to Lambert et al. (2010), work-family conflict involves the family/home life interfering with work and work life interfering with home life. Family on work conflicts involve conflicts that the family causes that impact work life, such as having a sick child to take care of or a conflict with a spouse. On the other hand, Lambert et al. (2010) describe work on family

conflicts as having three different forms: time-based conflicts, strained-based conflicts, and behavior-based conflicts. Time-based conflicts occur when time demands for work interfere with home life and an individual's personal time. For instance, both correctional institutions and law enforcement require staffing 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, including holidays. They may also be required to work mandatory overtime. Strained-based conflicts occur when demands and tensions of work negatively affect the quality of the individual's home life. When work behavior interferes with home life and is incompatible, behavior-based conflict occurs. For example, both law enforcement officers and correctional staff work roles require them to be suspicious of others and this may not be acceptable with family members and friends and can lead to conflict (Lambert et al., 2010). Lambert et al. (2010) notes that only a handful of studies have been conducted to examine the work-family conflict in correctional staff.

Burnout not only negatively affects the individual, but also impacts co-workers and the organizations themselves. It can cause decrease work performance, withdrawal or reduced interaction with co-workers, increased absenteeism, substance abuse, and frequent turnover (Lambert et al., 2009, July). In the end, burnout ends up costing the organizations additional funds. Burnout is not something that happens overnight, and it can be avoided with proper maintenance and care.

Possible Solutions to Job Stress and Burnout

Ideally, to address all the job stress and burnout for law enforcement officers and correctional staff would be to institute changes that would stop it from occurring or minimize it from happening. However, this is not always

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necessarily possible in their work environments and in the criminal justice field. With all of the implications and effects stress and burnout can have on law enforcement officers and correctional staff, there are several initiatives or solutions that have been pursued to help reduce or mitigate stress and burnout.

Hess (2009) discusses some strategies for reducing stress and avoiding burnout that could be useful for both law enforcement officers and police officers (p. 466). Physical exercise, proper nutrition, adequate sleep, social outlets, relaxation techniques and time management are all ways to reduce stress and avoid burnout in these fields (Hess, 2009, p. 466). Many organizations are also starting to recognize the hazards of stress for both the individuals and the organizations. Stress-management programs are starting to be implemented; however, the individual must want to take charge of their own stress management to be successful. Additionally, both professions have taken different, but similar measures to address the issues of stress and burnout.

Law Enforcement Officers

Often law enforcement officers are not open or speak about their stress and how it may be affecting their lives. The National Institute of Justice notes an unspoken code of silence exists for police officers about the stress that comes with the job. With the nature of the work environment, it is sometimes hard to mediate and spot stress before it is too late. One of the keys to finding a potential solution for stress is looking for the warning signs. Ramos (2010) discusses how training for law enforcement personnel and their

families is critical in addressing the problem of police suicide with teaching <https://assignbuster.com/examining-stress-and-burnout-for-law-enforcement-criminology-essay/>

others how to look for the warning signs and risk factors. Law enforcement personnel and families should also be trained to identify the signs and factors of basic stress to combat that before it leads to issues that are more serious. Additionally, Ramos (2010) notes that agencies need to encourage officers to seek assistance from personal physicians, employee assistance programs, peer support and crisis intervention counselors.

According to Burke (2009), a knowledge manager is the best prevent for burnout.

Police managers should be trained to detect the subtle personality changes that could indicated a problem. Early detection could help to avoid the most serious affects of burnout and from burnout consuming the officer. Burke (2009) points out that it near impossible for every police manager to know every officer under his or her supervision to be able to detect all signs; however, a team concept would allow the police manager to educate team members about the signs and symptoms of burnout so that team members known how to properly respond when the signs are detected. It also helps provide an open field of discussion among the team members. Additionally, an article in Call and Post discusses how polices are using military techniques to combat on the job stress (Anonymous, 2008, October). It involves an innovative program to train police leadership to recognize and address stress through a unique collaboration between military combat stress experts and local police forces. Cleveland's Division of Police, Case Western Reserve University, the Partnership for a Sager Cleveland the U. S. Department of Defense have partnered together to try to combat on the job stress (Anonymous, 2008, October). Supervisors and patrol officers are <https://assignbuster.com/examining-stress-and-burnout-for-law-enforcement-criminology-essay/>

provided tri-fold laminated cards that have the warning signs of stress to help identify operational stress early on. Awards were adapted from the United States Military to acknowledge the officers as well. Medals shaped like dog tags, as well as bronze medals, are also used to reinforce the training and honor those that have participated in the program (Anonymous, 2008, October).

Having available mental health and stress management programs to police officers can also be beneficial. According to Macmillan (2009), these programs need to be utilized more often, and the law enforcement field relies on three types of these programs: external, internal and hybrid. The external program involves an officer receiving treatment from an outside source. This allows the officer to keep anonymity. Internal programs are those that are ran from within the department or agency, and hybrid programs are a mixture of external and internal. In fact, Macmillan (2009) notes that departments and agencies can work around having limited funding for these programs with sharing the programs with other local government departments and agencies, such as with the fire department or paramedics. Macmillan (2009) also discusses the advantages of having peer counseling as an effective way to manage stress. Peer counseling programs allow officers with similar experiences and tensions to offer assistance and aid to fellow officers who may be suffering from stress. Additionally, it is sometimes easier for officers to talk and share with fellow officers than a psychologist or therapist (Macmillan, 2009). Departments can also often obtain assistance with wellness through local health departments or through their insurance carriers at little to no costs (Anonymous, 2009).

Sometimes police stress programs are not able to address the needs of a police officer or his or her family. Non-profit organizations such as the Central Florida Police Stress Unit, which have not affiliation with any police department or agency, can also be beneficial in dealing with stress.

Organizations, such as the Central Florida Police Stress Unit, are established to help both law enforcement and their families deal with stress that is directly or indirectly associated with the law enforcement profession. This type of organization is great tool for officers and their families that want to maintain confidentiality and are fearful of speaking out or others learning of their problems. Central Florida Police Unit provides a range of services, and has licensed mental health counselors, marriage and family therapists, clinical social workers and consulting police psychologist to help police officers and their families deal with a wide range of issues from marriage counseling to finance and retirement problems.

Correctional Staff

As with law enforcement officers, correctional staff are often not open about their stress and how it may be affecting their lives. In fact, correctional officers often deny that they are under stress in fear that it might be looked at unfavorably or make them seem weak (Schmallegger & Smykla, 2011, p. 319). With the nature of the work environment, it is sometimes hard to notice and mediate stress before it is too late. One of the keys to finding a potential solution for stress is looking for the warning signs. Correctional personnel, their families, and co-works should be trained to identify the signs and factors of stress to combat it before it leads to issues that are more serious.

According to an article written in *Corrections Today*, “ correctional agencies are losing money, losing good employees, and jeopardizing officer and public safety due to work-related stress.” (Anonymous, 2007) Correctional officers should also be encouraged to seek outside assistance from p