

# Stress and burnout in criminal justice criminology essay



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Comparison between Law Enforcement and Correctional. 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

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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), "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**

Issues in the officer's personal life, the pressures of law enforcement work, the attitude of the general public toward police work and officers, the

operation of the criminal justice system, and the law enforcement organization itself can all be stress factors for numerous police officers. 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 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, mandatory overtime, understaffing, 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  
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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**

### **Burnout**

### **Possible Solutions to Job Stress and Burnout**

#### **Law Enforcement Officers**

#### **Correctional Officers**

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)

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## **Conclusion**