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Police stress, state-trait anxiety, and stressors among U.S. Marshals

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Abstract

Unlike previous studies on stress in local police officers, this study was unique in that it used Deputy U.S. Marshals as the population pool. This study replicated the study conducted by Storch and Panzarella (1996) who determined stress levels and stressors of police officers. A standardized inventory of stress was combined with a questionnaire about job stressors, individual job and career variables, and personal variables. One hundred Deputy U.S. Marshals from offices across the country responded to an anonymous survey. Generally, deputies scored low on the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (Spielberger, Gorsuch, Lushene, Vagg, & Jacobs, 1983). The main stressors identified by the respondents were related to organizational variables, i.e., problems with management, bad bosses, and work environment. More stress was experienced by deputies who were inclined to think about job-related illnesses or being injured while on duty, those who were facing retirement, and those who disliked their current assignments.

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Introduction

For more than fifty years, people studied stress and its effects on various individuals, and for almost as long, researchers attempted to explain why police officers appeared to suffer from an inordinate amount of stress. Some of these studies focused on aspects of the job to determine the cause of the stress without going beyond the normal understanding of the word (Fell, Richard, & Wallace, 1980; Malloy & Mays, 1984; Pendleton, Stotland, Spiers, & Kirsch, 1989). Other studies provided their own definitions of stress. Some studies referred

to stress as a non-specific response of the body to any demand placed on it (Harpold & Feemster, 2002; Lawrence, 1984; Swanson, Territo, & Taylor, 1998), while other studies defined stress as a response to different internal and external demands of life (Harpold & Feemster, 2002). One study labeled stress as the body's reaction to internal and external stimuli that upset the body's normal state, in which the stimuli might be physical, mental, or emotional (Dempsey, 1994). Storch and Panzarella (1996) stated that tension related to a specific stressor was what one would normally refer to as stress; however, when tension did not have an immediately identifiable stimulus, it was usually referred to as anxiety. Even with the numerous definitions and explanations of stress, it could still be quite difficult to study because of the ambiguous effect on an individual largely due to the fact that

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any one factor could be either a positive stressor termed eustress or a negative stressor termed distress (Storch & Panzarella, 1996; Swanson et al., 1998).

When studying stress, most researchers typically utilized only local level police officers in their research. They had not attempted to determine what stressors, if any, affected federal law enforcement officers. Much of the literature addressed the purpose and the duties of a specific federal agency, but did not explore how the stressors of that job affected the individual federal officers or agents (Hoffer, 1986; Linkins, 1997; Slate, 1997; Stanton, 1985; Stutler, 2000). Among those studies, only a few focused on the U.S. Marshals Service, and those dealt only with explaining aspects of the job (Caudell-Feagan, 1993; Morris, 1985; Slate, 1997). Prior to this study, no research was conducted to empirically determine if U.S. Marshals experienced the same stressors as found to be experienced by local law enforcement officers. Consequently, this study was needed to provide valuable feedback for the administration of federal and local law enforcement agencies, in general, and for the administration of the U.S. Marshal Service specifically. To accomplish this purpose, this study used the U.S. Marshal Service as the population and replicated prior research on police officer stress conducted by Storch and Panzarella (1996).

Identifying law enforcement stressors

It was stated that police work was more stressful than most other occupations, and that the stress was caused by inherent dangers of the job such as repeated encounters with violent people, the risk of being assaulted with a deadly weapon, and the possibility of being seriously injured, even killed (Dempsey, 1994; Fell et al., 1980; Lawrence, 1984; Reiser & Geiger, 1984; Swanson et al., 1998). The belief that these encounters were the primary cause of stress continued to prevail throughout the literature even though empirical evidence was insufficient to support this position (Lawrence, 1984; Malloy & Mays, 1984; Terry, 1981). Malloy and Mays (1984) defined the problems associated with identifying police stressors as stemming “from a priori assumptions regarding the stressors inherent in police work” (p. 207). They summarized much of the literature as suggesting that the impending threat of physical harm and involvement in violent situations were the major police stressors. They noted, however, that the strongest research in the area actually suggested, “that helplessness and feelings of uncontrollability in the work environment may be a major source of stress for police officers” (p. 207). As summarized by

Lawrence (1984), such findings did not diminish the dangers faced by police officers, but those factors over which the officer had little personal control, such as work schedules and the administration, proved to be most stressful.

Adding to the difficulty in identifying job stressors, police officers themselves described their work as being more potentially dangerous than actually dangerous (Cullen, Link, Travis, & Lemming, 1983). Contributing to the confusion, the crime fighter orientation and mentality of the officer could nullify the stress that might otherwise be engendered by police work (Storch & Panzarella, 1996; Stotland, 1991). In addition, it was suggested that the excitement of the occasional encounter with violence might even mitigate some of the stress caused by organizational variables (Crank & Caldero, 1991).

The quest of many researchers over the past couple of decades was to eliminate the confusion surrounding police stressors by empirically identifying them. In order to provide a definitional basis for the research, some studies arranged the specific factors that led to stress into four basic categories: organizational practices, the criminal justice system, the public, and the police work itself (Reese, 1986; Swanson et al., 1998; Territo & Vetter, 1981; Violanti & Aron, 1993). Other studies narrowed the factors down to two major categories based on the job stressors mentioned by officers: organizational and inherent police stressors (Martelli, Waters, & Martelli, 1989; Swanson et al., 1998; Violanti & Aron, 1995). Organizational practices were defined as those events precipitated by the administration that were bothersome to the officers, while inherent factors were defined as those events generally occurring in police work which could be harmful to the officers, i.e., danger, violence, and crime (Violanti & Aron, 1993). When comparing the two stressors, researchers generally concluded that the organizational stressors had a stronger impact overall on officers than the inherent factors (Graf, 1986; Martelli et al., 1989; Norvell, Belles, & Hills, 1988; Violanti & Aron, 1995).

Storch and Panzarella (1996) studied the proposed categories and observed that two main groups seemed to develop from among the categories. They found that one of the main groups of stressors included the organizational variables, i.e., relationships with superiors, personnel policies, and work conditions. Storch and Panzarella (1996) added that among the organizational stressors in police work were the lack of promotional opportunity and, ironically, an actual promotion. The second major group of stressors consisted of relationships with those who were not police officers, i.e., the public, the media, and the legal system.

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