On-the-Job Stress in Policing—

Reducing It, Preventing It

Photo: EyeWire

Police officers and members of their families consider their job to be one of the most stressful. It is hard to disagree with that assessment, as officers themselves report high rates of divorce, alcoholism, suicide, and other emotional and health problems.[1] No job is immune from stress, but for the law enforcement officer, the strains and tensions experienced at work are unique, often extreme, and sometimes unavoidable.

Fortunately, many law enforcement agencies, recognizing the high toll exacted by stress on officers and their families, are tackling it with an array of creative prevention and reduction strategies. Through the CLEFS (Corrections and Law Enforcement Family Support) program of the National Institute of Justice, several of these agencies are receiving support.

This article summarizes an NIJ report that documented the causes and effects of job-related stress affecting law enforcement officers and their families. Much of the information was drawn from interviews, conducted as part of the study, with officers themselves and their family members.[2] Also included in this article are highlights of some stress prevention and reduction programs reported in the study and of some of the CLEFS projects.

Police officers see themselves as under more pressure than 10 or 20 years ago. Photo: EyeWire

Sources of Stress

Exposure to violence, suffering, and death is inherent to the profession of law enforcement officer. There are other sources of stress as well. Officers who deal with offenders on a daily basis may view some sentences as too lenient; they may perceive the public's opinion of police performance to be unfavorable; they often are required to work mandatory, rotating shifts; and they may not have enough time to spend with their families. Police officers also face unusual, often highly disturbing, situations, such as dealing with a child homicide victim or the survivors of vehicle crashes.

The nature of the organizations in which officers work may also be a source of stress. Police departments historically have been structured along military lines and as a result often have been rigidly hierarchical and highly bureaucratic, with management styles that can be inflexible. Although in many instances police culture is changing, in many others the leadership remains predominately white and male, opportunities for advancement are limited, and despite the ubiquity of the personal computer, a large amount of paperwork still is required.

Is Stress Getting Worse?

Officers may increasingly view stress as a normal part of their job, but they also see themselves as being under considerably more pressure than they or their colleagues were 10 or 20 years ago. They see new sources of stress in the high level of violent crime and in what they perceive as greater public scrutiny and adverse publicity. They also feel that police camaraderie has declined; they fear contracting air- and blood-borne diseases such as TB and HIV/AIDS; and they see themselves as having to deal with such relatively new issues as cultural diversity and the imperative of "political correctness."

Even widely accepted changes in law enforcement can lead to more stress for some officers. Although community policing may mean more job satisfaction, greater overall departmental efficiency, and higher morale, the transition to it can cause apprehension on the part of the officers who on a day-to-day basis must operationalize this fundamental shift in the philosophy of policing. Performance expectations are new and perhaps not fully under-

How One Agency Pinpointed Stress

When the Baltimore Police Department decided to seek out the sources of stress in the agency, they turned for assistance to public health researchers at nearby Johns Hopkins University. With the Fraternal Order of Police as the third partner, the Department created Project SHIELDS to take on this task as well as to develop response strategies.

The sources of stress were identified by means of a survey, conducted by the researchers, among line officers and spouses/life partners. Some of the results were surprising. For example, fully two-thirds of the officers said they considered media reports of alleged police wrongdoing to be stressful to them. The same proportion said that what they view as lack of administrative support for officers in trouble was a major source of stress. Almost one-fourth reported low energy or chronic back pain, which they believed was related to job stress.

After the Hopkins researchers complete their analysis of the survey data, they and the project's advisory board (officers and family members) will help the Department develop a response. Total quality management (TQM) teams will be established to focus on selected issues drawn from the research findings. Consisting of officers from all ranks, the TQM teams will develop strategies to address aspects of organizational stress identified in the survey as particularly problematic.*

* Unpublished progress report of "Law Enforcement Work Stress and Family Support (Project SHIELDS)," Johns Hopkins University School of Hygiene and Public Health, Baltimore, submitted to the National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice, by Robyn Gershon, Principal Investigator, March 31, 1999.

stood by all officers. Whether or not stress is increasing, identifying the causes is a first step toward reducing and preventing it. (See "How One Agency Pinpointed Stress.")

Counting the Ways: The Effects of Stress

The physical and emotional effects of stress are numerous and often severe. Any one of them can impair job performance. The consequences of job-related stress commonly reported by police officers are:

- Cynicism and suspiciousness.
- Emotional detachment from various aspects of daily life.
- Reduced efficiency.
- Absenteeism and early retirement.
- Excessive aggressiveness (which may trigger an increase in citizen complaints).
- Alcoholism and other substance abuse problems.
- Marital or other family problems (for example, extramarital affairs, divorce, or domestic violence).
- Post-traumatic stress disorder.
- Heart attacks, ulcers, weight gain, and other health problems.
- Suicide.

According to many counselors who work with police officers, difficulties with intimate relationships are the most common problem they treat.

Families Feel Stress, Too

If the effects on officers are severe, they can be similarly serious for officers' family members. In one survey of the spouses of police officers, a very large percentage said they experienced unusually high levels of stress because of their spouse's job.[3]

Stress felt by spouses is a concern in and of itself and also because a stressful home environment can adversely affect the officer's job performance. Even conditions, situations, or incidents that may not trouble the officers themselves—or that they may even enjoy, such as shift work or undercover work—can mean severe problems for their families. Sources of stress commonly cited by officers' spouses include:

- Shift work and overtime.
- Concern over the spouse's cynicism, need to feel in control in the home, or inability or unwillingness to express feelings.
- Fear that the spouse will be hurt or killed in the line of duty.
- Officers' and others' excessively high expectations of their children.
- Avoidance, teasing, or harassment of the officer's children by other children because of the parent's job.
- Presence of a gun in the home.
- The officer's 24-hour role as a law enforcer.
- Perception that the officer prefers to spend time with coworkers rather than with his or her family.
- Too much or too little discussion of the job.
- Family members' perception of the officer as paranoid or excessively vigilant and overprotective of them.
- Problems in helping the officer cope with work-related problems.
- "Critical incidents," or the officer's injury or death on the job.[4]

Because stress affects family members, they are often the first to recognize the officer's need for help, and they can play a crucial role by

encouraging him or her to seek assistance before the problem becomes worse. This is the concept behind the Spousal Academy, a component of the comprehensive officer and family support program offered by the Collier County (Florida) Sheriff's Office.

The Academy offers training to spouses and other domestic partners of deputies and recruits who are enrolled in the Office's training academy. The 10-hour program involves an introduction to the nature of law enforcement work and an opportunity to discuss expectations about the effect the spouses' occupation will have on family life. Participants learn about the structure of the Sheriff's Office, about such human resource issues as employee benefits (health insurance, for example), and about stress management and conflict resolution. Two related programs in the development stage are peer support groups for spouses and life partners and for deputies' adolescent children.[5]

Soliciting feedback from participants is part of the program. Several noted the program's effectiveness in conveying the reality of what an officer does on the job. In the words of one spouse, "I now realize some of what my husband goes through." One of the comments heard most frequently concerns the value of simply meeting and interacting with other spouses. As one participant characterized the spouse's role, "Sometimes, this can be a lonely job."[6]

Countering Domestic Violence

There is some belief that a relatively large proportion of law enforcement officers may be involved in domestic violence, in part because of the stressful nature of the job.[7] Many law enforcement agencies have begun to turn their attention to the issue and devise ways to respond.

One agency, the Los Angeles (County) Sheriff's Department (LASD), has adopted a zero-tolerance policy toward domestic violence, with a full range of disciplinary actions that could include dismissal from the force. To reduce the number of domestic violence incidents among the LASD's 8,000 sworn officers, the Department bolstered the policy with a training program for all supervisory personnel; a vigorous information dissemination campaign (which included development of an educational video to be shown to all staff); and counseling services for individuals, couples, and families. The Department has trained more than 1,200 supervisors to spot signs of stress and domestic violence.[8]

Why Start or Expand a Stress Program?

Why should law enforcement agencies spend time and money on a law enforcement stress program and perhaps set aside space for it? The answer has to do with the implications of stress for the department. Essentially, stress reduces the quality of departmental performance.

Stress Affects Agency Performance

The cumulative negative effects of stress on officers and their families typically affect the agency through impaired officer performance and the related problems of tardiness, absenteeism, and low morale. The consequence for the department is lower productivity. Stress-related performance inadequacies also may generate labor-management friction and lead to civil suits. There may be adverse public reaction as a result of stress-related incidents, such as an officer's suicide or a case of police brutality. Even problems that are confined to only a few individuals or that occur rarely can have major repercussions. For instance, a single incident in which a handful of officers abuse alcohol or other drugs can lower public confidence in the entire agency.[9]

Though establishing and operating a stress reduction program requires a financial outlay, it can mean cost savings in the long term. That is because stress affects the bottom line. Agencies can find it enormously costly when employee turnover increases as a result of stress-related early retirement or long-term disability. Robert Peppler, Assistant Sheriff of the San Bernardino (California) Sheriff's Department noted the cost to his agency: "We have a tremendous investment in cops," he said, "and if they leave after one traumatic incident, we have lost a tremendous amount. A dollar in psychological services now can save us hundreds of thousands down the road."[10]

Why Not an EAP?

Many agencies have access to city- or countywide employee assistance programs (EAP's). Law enforcement staff and their families may be eligible for services from additional providers. These may include police chaplains, wellness programs, support groups, and local private service providers. This prompts the question: Why shouldn't an agency rely on other existing programs rather than develop its own stress reduction program?

A Little Help From Your Friends—Peer Support in New York City

Sometimes it takes a tragedy or critical incident to prompt a law enforcement agency or related organization to develop or expand a stress reduction program for police officers.

That was the case in New York City, where 26 police officers committed suicide in the 2-year period from 1994 through 1995. The unusually high number was the result of such factors as perceived pressure from the media and allegations of corruption. The crisis spurred the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association, supported by the city council, to establish a peer support program by officers for officers. The Members Assistance Program (MAP) trained 150 officer volunteers to aid fellow officers and an additional 26 to aid their families. The peer support officers staff a 24-hour hotline, serve as a point of first contact and screening for officers who report stress-related difficulties, and encourage individuals who need more intensive help to seek it.

MAP also trained 60 mental health practitioners in law enforcement stress, and these practitioners began taking referrals from the peer support officers. Between 1996, the year the program started, and 1998, the hotline received some 1,500 calls, resulting in more than 650 referrals.*

* "NYC Patrolmen's Benevolent Association Members Assistance Program: Program for the Reduction of Stress for New York City Police Officers and Their Families," final report submitted to the National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice, grant 96–FS–VX–007, December 1998.

The fact that a service is available does not necessarily mean it is meeting—or can meet—the distinctive needs of police officers. Mental health practitioners, police administrators, and others, when asked about city or county EAP's, said police officers do not use them because these programs do not provide enough confidentiality, because EAP staff usually do not understand law enforcement, and because the officers feared the stigma that might be attached to using an EAP.

What Stress Reduction Programs Look Like

Approaches to reduce or prevent stress can take many forms, among them:

- Services provided by a private mental health practice or an individual therapist working with one or more law enforcement agencies.
- Peer support and referrals from specially trained police officers.
- Psychological services set up in the agency through the union, chaplaincy, or employee assistance program.
- A combination of these arrangements.

Almost all programs are geared primarily to line officers, because they constitute the largest group in any law enforcement agency, they deal with the public on a day-to-day basis, they are widely believed to experience high levels of stress, and they may have limited means to pay for extended counseling. Most programs also provide at least minimal services (that is, referral to other treatment providers) to nonsworn personnel and former employees, as well as to officers' and other employees' family members and close friends.

Services typically include assessment and referral to mental health or other practitioners; critical incident debriefing; intervention for other types of crises; short-term counseling for both individuals and families; and long-term counseling and other services, including treatment for substance abuse.

Most mental health practitioners emphasize the importance of involving family members, when possible, in all these services. To varying extents, all programs include referrals to outside sources of assistance. For some programs that operate with limited resources, referral to outside services is the primary component. That is often the case with programs staffed largely by peers. (See "A Little Help From Your Friends—Peer Support in New York City.")

Preventing Stress

The most common method for preventing stress is to train officers to recognize its signs and sources and to develop individual coping strategies. Training helps encourage officers and nonsworn personnel to use stress reduction techniques and services and dispels the stigma frequently attached to seeking assistance.

One period during which officers could be taught about stress is when they are at the academy, according to most of the police officers, program administrators, and independent mental health practitioners who were asked about this issue. They felt that the initial training period was a possibility because recruits are a captive audience and because the information may remain with them throughout their entire police career. There is some thinking that "inoculation" during recruit training is not the best approach, because most recruits are

not experienced enough to recognize that stress comes with the job. The optimal time to reach them may be 6 to 8 months into the job, after they have experienced on-the-job stress. Some agencies offer inservice training not only for line officers but also for midlevel managers and command staff, prospective retirees, and nonsworn personnel.

Because, as noted above, the structure and management of the agency can be a significant source of stress, mental health professionals should consider working with departmental management and unions to plan and implement organizational change. This can be done in a number of ways, all of which fall within the domain of management:

- Training command staff in effective supervision.
- Training field training officers to constructively supervise rookies.
- Eliminating rotating shift work.
- Improving the match between officers' capabilities and the demands of specific assignments.

What NIJ Is Doing

The issue of job-related stress for law enforcement officers and their families has received attention at the highest levels of government. In the 1994 Omnibus Crime Act, the President and Congress recognized the severity of the problem and mandated a Federal Government response. The National Institute of Justice was assigned the task of sponsoring research, establishing pilot programs, and conducting program evaluations that support State and local efforts.

Research and Development

Since the start of the Corrections and Law Enforcement Family Support program, NIJ has sponsored research and program development in some 30 agencies and related organizations (labor unions and employee professional organizations, for example). These projects include the development of innovative treatment and training programs as well as research into the nature and causes of stress.

In one study now under way, NIJ is exploring the nature and extent of job-related stress for police in a single geographic region. And to improve access to service, NIJ provided support to the Metro Nashville Police Department in creating an online resource of information for the families of law enforcement officers, particularly those in underserved communities. Available on the Internet, the resource is a new type of service delivery system.[11] The Web site contains, among other things, materials developed by psychologists for preparing workshops on stress, message boards, a chat room, links to related Web sites, recommended readings, and postings from police psychologists and consultants.

For More Information

Law Enforcement Officer Stress

- Visit the CLEFS page on the NIJ Web site: http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/clefs.

- Visit http://policefamilies.com, a Web site developed by the Metropolitan Police Department of Nashville and Davidson County with funding from the National Institute of Justice.
- See *Developing a Law Enforcement Stress Program for Officers and Their Families*, by Peter Finn and Julie Esselman Tomz, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, March 1997 (NCJ 163175).

Corrections Officer Stress

- "Fighting the Enemy Within: Helping Officers Deal With Stress," by Rebecca Childress, Vincent Talucci, and Jenifer Wood, *Corrections Today*, December 1999: 70.
- *Addressing Correctional Officer Stress: Programs and Strategies*, by Peter Finn, in process, forthcoming in 2000 from the National Institute of Justice.

Acknowledgments

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From LEFS to CLEFS

Originally geared solely to law enforcement, the NIJ program has expanded to include corrections officers. In some cases, corrections officers experience more intense stress-generating incidents than do law enforcement officers. They may, for example, encounter violent behavior by inmates more often and over longer periods of time.

NIJ support for research and development is given to corrections agencies as well as law enforcement agencies. A study of programs to reduce and prevent stress among corrections staff is under development.

NCJ 180079

Notes

1. Burke, R.J., "Career Stages, Satisfaction, and Well-Being Among Police Officers," *Psychological Reports* 65 (1989):3–12; and Delprino, R.P., K. O'Quin, and C. Kennedy, "Identification of Work and Family Services for Law Enforcement Personnel," final report submitted to the National Institute of Justice, 1997(NIJ grant 95–IJ–CX–0113).
2. The NIJ report is *Developing a Law Enforcement Stress Program for Officers and Their Families*, by Peter Finn and Julie Esselman Tomz, Issues and Practices, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, March 1997 (NCJ 163175).
3. The survey was conducted as part of a study by Leanor Boulin-Johnson, professor of African- American Studies and Family Studies at Arizona State University. See "On the Front Lines: Police Stress and Family Well-Being," testimony of Leanor Boulin-Johnson before the Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, U.S. House of Representatives, 102nd Congress, 1st Session, May 20, 1991, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991:32.
4. Borum, R., and C. Philpot, "Therapy With Law Enforcement Couples: Clinical Management of the 'High-Risk Lifestyle,'" *American Journal of Family Therapy* 21 (1993):122–135.
5. Ferguson, Edward T., and Acey L. Edgemon, "Collier County Sheriff's Office Law Enforcement Family Support Initiative," draft executive summary, report submitted to the National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice, April 1, 1999.
6. Unpublished program evaluations by participants in Spousal Academy, Collier County (Florida) Sheriff's Office, no date.
7. "On the Front Lines: Police Stress and Family Well-Being," testimony of B.J. Anderson before the Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, U.S. House of Representatives, 102nd Congress, 1st Session, May 20, 1991, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991:61–63.
8. Unpublished progress report of the Family Violence Prevention and Recovery Project (FVPRP), Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, submitted to the National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice, by Audrey L. Honig, Principal Investigator, FVPRP, and Steven E. Sultan, Project Coordinator, FVPRP, for period September 1, 1998, through March 3, 1999.
9. Springer, K., "When the Helper Needs Help: Stress and the Law Enforcement Employee," *EAP Association Exchange* 25 (1995): 6–11.
10. Finn and Tomz, *Developing a Law Enforcement Stress Program for Officers and Their Families:* 3.
11. The site address is http://policefamilies.com.

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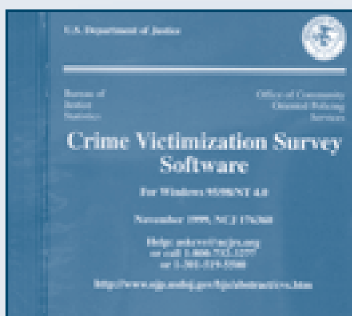

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The software requires a PC with at least a 486 processor, 16 MB RAM, a VGA video adapter, Windows95/98/NT 4.0, and 50 MB free disk space.

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- Free via the Internet at http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/abstract/cvs.htm. (Contact askcvs@ncjrs.org for the user ID and password.)
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For additional information, contact the BJS Clearinghouse:

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