

## Mental Health Problems in the Indian Police – How we could help them

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### ABSTRACT

The objectives of the paper was to find out that what are the major mental health related problems faced by our police personnel, how they coped with them and in what way we (mental health professionals and our government) can help them to cope with in a more effective way. Policing has been described as one of the most challenging, stressful, health threatening and psychologically dangerous jobs in the world. Their work is associated with danger, bureaucracy, and tense community relations.

The major mental health related problems faced by the police personnel are stress, impulsive behavior, heart attacks, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and at its worse, acute or chronic stress can lead to suicide among them. These mental health problems affects their work, family and as well as their social life. Their personal lives were often negatively influenced, especially with respect to maintaining non-police friendships, not enough time to spend with their children and family, no time/leave to attend social functions or festivals), alcoholism, sexual dissatisfaction among spouse, use of abusing language, fight with spouse on a little issue, lower job satisfaction, absenteeism, excessive aggressiveness at work, reduced efficiency, short tempered etc. Thus, this paper presents a modest attempt towards rendering police jobs and their life more satisfying and healthier than they are now.

**Key words:** Police, Indian Police, Mental Health Problems, Stressors, Coping, Job Enrichment.

(Paper received – 11<sup>th</sup> November 2017, Peer review completed – 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2017)

(Accepted – 4<sup>th</sup> December 2017)

### INTRODUCTION

Policing has been described as one of the most challenging, stressful, health threatening and psychologically dangerous jobs in the world. Their work is associated with danger, bureaucracy, politics and tense community relations. Police are defined as those nonmilitary individuals or organizations who are given the general right by government to use coercive force to enforce the law and whose primary purpose is to respond to problems of individual and group conflict that involve illegal behavior. The police role, and what is considered to be appropriate activity and behavior, is determined by legal requirements, the police organization, and the community [1].

Police work is seems not a job but a calling by 24x7. A police officer faces physical dangers on a daily basis and stress for which he or she is not trained to deal with. He also assets that the police officer has to face scrutiny from the community and his/her own peers on a daily basis. Nowadays, Hollywood & Bollywood action packed movies also glamorizes police work, making the police officers to be seen as a hero- a tough character with no fear and who can experience trauma and violence without suffering any ill effects [2].

Officers in the field struggle with constantly changing situations, and routine calls which can go bad quickly. They also pursue dangerous and sometimes desperate criminals who make poor decisions out of

panic. A police officer must be able to rapidly assess a situation and make sound choices which will benefit the community, using the tools at his or her disposal, which can range from riot gear to ticket books. Responding to high-risk calls demands an elevated level of alertness, engagement in the moment, quick thinking and the capacity to perform well under high stress. This is not unlike what a professional athlete experiences during competition. However, there is often a long-term cost of being able to perform in these high-demand situations: failure to survive emotionally. Many officers who begin their careers with unbridled enthusiasm end up, over the course of their careers, suffering problems in both their personal lives and their long-term relationships with their department. Is there a connection between the type of officer who, early in his career, likes the emotional intensity offered by police work and the officer who may experience personal and professional difficulty as their career progresses? The answer is yes, and here is why [3].

## MAJOR MENTAL HEALTH RELATED PROBLEMS FACED BY OUR POLICE PERSONNEL

### Sources of stress

Researches indicate that people within certain occupations, such as accountants, air traffic controllers, lawyers, physicians, and police officials experience a higher than average amount of stress and the level of stress vary by job assignment [4-6]. Colwell [7] confirms this notion indicating that police work tends to impose a higher degree of stress and a multiplicity of stressful situations on the individual than do most other professions.

After a review of literature available on mental health problems associated with police work, the following sources have been identified. This information is gathered from several magazines, newspapers, journal articles and reflecting the sources of stressors, have been categorized as follows:

- Stress among policemen would manifest in the form of fatigue, depression, inability to concentrate and impulsive behaviour. These danger signals are quite common among the traffic policemen and patrolling police whose nature of work is such that they hardly can control their temper.
- People normally complain that policemen are rude and highhanded, but what they fail to see are the extreme conditions under which they lead their lives. A number of studies were carried out in different parts of the world for understanding the level of stress among police personnel.
- In a recently conducted study among the West Bengal Police Officers revealed that 42 and 12% of the West Bengal Police Officers were suffering from moderate and high psychological stress respectively. Further analysis of data revealed that the main areas of stress included un-profitability (32%), role overload (74%), role conflict (50%), powerlessness (28%), role ambiguity (36%), unreasonable group and political pressure (58%), intrinsic impoverishment (32%) and under participation (60%). Findings suggest that special attention is required for taking need-based measures for each of the above areas of stress for unburdening the level of stress among West Bengal Police Officers [8]. In another study carried out by Kolkata Traffic Police Officers, found that the main causes of stress were inadequate rest, no leave, and abstaining from social occasions and excessive work pressure [9].
- Green [10] carried out a study among Police Officers with a view to ascertaining whether the Police Officers had severe post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) than in civilians. No significant differences were found, although there was a tendency for higher use of alcohol and to try not to think about the trauma
- The magnitude and dimensions of a policeman's organizational stress has been totally overlooked so far in India. In Punjab, Kashmir and North Eastern regions, CRPF personnel remain under constant threats of injury or death or repeated narrow escapes. A number of psychological and interpersonal factors contribute to the overall stress load experienced by the CRPF personnel such as a reduction in personal freedom, separation from home and loved ones, constant fear and anxiety and unpredictability of the operational combat situation. Police personnel undergo intense stress, when they see their colleagues and co-workers injured or killed during performance of duties. Police personnel, who are the helpless witnesses of the ghastly scenes of tens of people killed in a terrorist shootout in a train etc. can never forget the ghastly sight.

- Indian policemen are constantly facing rapid social changes such as breakup of joint family system, which gave security, increasing mental conflicts, and social disorders and social changes have brought in their wake a number of stresses for them. Police in India, particularly, after independence, generally suffer from serious chronic stress due to job-ambiguity, conflicting values, negative police image and job overload. Sometime life threatening situations create serious stress among police personnel particularly when they have a feeling of economic insecurity for their families and dependents.
- Police officials are generally never paid nearly what they should be. Levinson [11] asserts that mental health workers and policemen who work under severe pressure in people-orientated jobs for long periods of time with little support and limited gains are among the prime victims of burnout. Sewell [6] confirms that police officials receive poor salaries. Salary increases, have not been sufficient because there are other increases as well such as medical aids, pension contributions and taxes. "Benefits such as subsidized vehicles and cell phones are not allotted to officials with lower ranks or middle management and it seems as if these people live from hand to mouth. As a result of a low salary, many employees in government departments are moonlighting in order to generate an additional income. This is a very real cause of corruption.
- According to Van Zyl [12], once employees have been disadvantaged via restructuring, a promotional process or any other such occurrence, and the injustice is not rectified at a later stage, they may develop a permanent feeling of being the victim of the processes and procedures within the organization.
- According to Geldenhuys [13] most police officials who have to kill a suspect in the line of duty experience a great deal of conflicting emotions like guilt even if they were completely justified in using violence. They experience a great deal of mental trauma and depression due to the fact that they have actually taken the life of another human being. Although the person shot was a criminal, somewhere out there is a family who has lost a loved one. There is nothing glamorous about killing another human being. This can have devastating consequences that erode the emotional well-being of any person, even that of a seasoned police official.
- According to Geldenhuys [13], police officials are trained to hide their emotions, right from day one at the Police Training College. They see emotions as getting in the way of the job they are performing. Emotions are suppressed daily for years. The stress takes its toll either quickly or slowly and police officials experience Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD). Every time a police official is called to a crime scene, the adrenalin pumps. Police are aware that their lives are in danger. Also, they work an average of 10 hours a day during which time they attend to cases like housebreaking, domestic violence, armed robbery, rape, hit and run, murder or suicide.
- After the night shift, the chances are good that they must be in court the next day to testify about a case that took place weeks, months or even years ago. Should there be any time left to rest, they try to rest for a while before the sun sets and they have to report on duty for the night shift again.
- MaClean (cited in Corelli) [14] asserts that alcohol abuse among policemen is more than the norm because of the type of work that they do, their superman mentality, the macho image that they feel they have to protect and to handle the pressures of the job, they engage in their favourite pastime which is drinking.
- Tripathi, Naidu, Thapa and Biswas [15] have done a project on 'Stress, Health and Performance: A study of Police Organization in Uttar Pradesh'. They found that (a) The constables had significantly higher suicidal tendency compared to the head constables, sub—inspectors and the inspectors. The deputy SPs did not differ from any other groups. (b) The constables and head constables experienced significantly greater degree of daily hassles compared to the other groups and the inspectors experienced the least degree of daily hassles. (c) The constables were significantly more depressed than any other groups and the deputy SPs were the least depressed group. (d) Suicide was negatively associated with grant of leave and support of officers means, those who did not get leave during times of emergency and failed to get support from higher officers were more likely to-commit suicide. (e) Depression was significantly associated with low degree of just reward in the organization, low satisfaction with promotion procedures, low chances of getting leave, lower authority and' low support from officers. It was positively related with dissatisfaction with transfer procedures and conflict.

### **Consequences of these stressors in their life (how this day to day stressors affect their life)**

It is high time we noticed the above mentioned alarming trends of police behavior and conducted proper study of police stress in India. There is a need for growing organizational sensitivity to the problem of stress in police in India. There are only a few studies on the stress of police personnel and there is an imperative need for more field studies. As a participant observer, I found that police job frequently leads to mental stagnation, psychological fatigue, lop-sided development of personality, and constantly stressful challenges endangering personal safety and life. Pessimism, neuroticism and cynicism were significantly related with job-stress in police. Young officers, particularly feel more stress and feel constantly a sense of injustice when job-demands are not commensurate with the administrative and organizational support. Constables and Head Constables have serious stress when they find inadequate training; hostile working environment and long hours of work are all contributing adverse effect on their health and personality.

According to Schaefer [4] law enforcement has traditionally been referred to as an occupation that leads to a variety of stress related maladies such as hypertension, cardiovascular irregularities, and gastrointestinal disorders. According to Finn [16], police work is widely considered to be among the most stressful occupations. It is associated with high rates of divorce, alcoholism, suicide and other emotional and health problems. Geldenhuys [13] claims that police do not receive the praise, glory and appreciation that they deserve. Roosendaal [17] concurs, saying that a police official has one of the most thankless jobs. To some of middle and lower rank, respect and appreciation for their work is just a dream.

Pandey [18] found following important factors that emerges in his thematic content analysis of exploring the construct of police job's stressors i.e. nature of duty, lack of support, external pressure (political pressure), feeling of biasness, lack of freedom, lack of infrastructure, and working conditions. Further, police job's stressors were negatively related to quality of life, job performance, quality of work life, and personal life of police personnel.

According to Roberts and Levison [19], findings suggest that officers took their job stress home and it influenced their interactions with their wives. These influences of job stress were found regardless of couples' marital satisfaction, the husband's work shift and the couple's parenthood status.

They further claim that job stress is far more toxic for marital interaction than is physical exhaustion. A husband's job stress produces a physiological and affective climate in which both spouses show many of the signs associated with future marital dissolution and distress like heightened cardiovascular arousal, increased negative affect decreased positive affect and more emotional distance and disconnectedness. Even with those who attempt to leave their stress at work or keep their lingering stress to themselves, stress is likely to have a pernicious effect on the emotional balance of marital interactions. It is also important to keep in mind that marital discord appears to be the most significant problem for the suicidal officer. Additional police stressors that appear to further contribute to marital discord include the following [20]:

- **Overprotection of family members:** Due to the suspicious nature of the work and the trauma and degradation they observe daily, officers often become overly protective of their families, which can lead to resentment by the family members.
- **Problems with children:** Children of the police personnel often say that their father/mother never gives them proper time, love & care because of they were always have a tight busy scheduled.
- **Hardening of emotions:** To function adequately on the job, officers often find it necessary to suppress their feelings, which can lead to conflicts with spouses due to communication problems.
- **Sexual problems:** The pressures and working hours of police work may lead to intimacy problems, which, in turn, lead to frustration and anxiety; this lack of intimacy may then lead the parties to seek release outside the marriage.

Because marital and family problems can have such a devastating impact on job performance, many police departments are trying to help their officers in reducing their problems by developing programs aimed at helping family members to understand and cope with the stressors inherent in police work.

## COPING STRATEGIES AND THE ROLE OF MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS AND OUR GOVERNMENT

Some of the contemporary evidence indicates that many of the problems associated with shift changes, including loss of sleep and fatigue, alcohol and sleeping pill use, sick time, and accidents, can be substantially reduced if schedules are designed to accommodate the body's natural circadian rhythm, which controls sleep-wake cycles.

A survey conducted in 1974 by the National Police Academy (previously located in Mount Abu and now in Hyderabad) analyzed the attitudes of subordinate policemen towards their work. While 40.5% of the personnel interviewed (who included 9 Inspectors, 45 Sub-Inspectors, 51 Assistant Sub-Inspectors and Head Constables and 95 Constables) stated that their work gave them a feeling of accomplishment. 46% felt that it did so only to a limited extent, and 13.5% felt that it did not give them any satisfaction at all. To another question, 44.9% stated that there was hardly any opportunity to work according to one's liking. Most significant was that 47% of the respondents were of the view that they had become less enthusiastic about their work than when they entered the department,"

Subsequently, the author talked to a cross-section of the ranks of Deputy Superintendent, Inspector, Sub-Inspector and Constabulary on what they considered the most monotonous aspects of their work. The following duties of routine were identified by each of these ranks as dull and tedious:

- (a) **Deputy Superintendents:** (i) Inspections. (ii) Village visiting. (iii) Checking of patrolmen and guard personnel.
- (b) **Inspectors** (i) Inspections. (ii) Village visiting. (iii) Checking of patrolmen and guard personnel. (iv) Preparation of periodical reports to the Superintendent of Police. (v) Security of visiting personages.
- (c) **Sub-Inspector:** (i) Checking of bad characters and arms licenses. (ii) Maintenance of station records. (iii) Holding of inquests. (iv) Security of visiting personages. (v) Court attendance. (vi) Protocol.
- (d) **Constabulary:** (i) Sentry duty at the station and sub-jail. (ii) Escort of prisoners. (iii) Route-lining during visits of important personages (iv) Night patrol. (v) Protocol.

The above duties are an important part of police routine. When these are considered drudgery, one can understand the magnitude of the task facing a person undertaking a re-design of jobs in a police force.

Now mental health researchers try to explore and identify conditions which alone induce an employee to perform better and better. Taylor [21] says that workers could respond with their best effort if material rewards were closely related to work achievements. Any number of studies have revealed that the low motivation of a majority of subordinate police staff is due not only to their poor service conditions, but also to the kind of work they are expected to perform. According to a study the degree of job satisfaction that is perceived among policemen is on par with that seen in skilled craftsmen. But their rating is definitely lower than that of professionals. Another study which addressed itself to the "prestige ranking" of various occupations- a factor that is closely linked to employee motivation-arrived at almost similar conclusions and tagged policemen on to a clerk.

There must be need for make some major changes in Police personnel' schedules in an attempt to reduce such problems:

- (1) There shifts should be change every month rather than every week, allowing more time to adjust to the change.
- (2) The rotation should be shifted forward-from day, to evening, to graveyard-rather than backward as had been the previous practice. Because the typical circadian clock runs on about a twenty-five-hour day, the natural tendency is to shift to a later (rather than an earlier) hour.
- (3) Consecutive work days should be reduced from six to four, allowing officers to catch up on lost sleep and avoiding the cumulative sleep deprivation night-shift workers often experience.

Job enrichment is a way to "build jobs into a higher sense of challenge, improvement and achievement." It can also be defined as "the re-design of a job to include tasks and activities that promote the psychological involvement of the workers in the job itself."

While this can be achieved by giving the needed variety to a function, a job may be enriched in several other ways. These are:

- Providing each worker a 'whole job' that has a definable end-product which would also permit latitude with regard to targets, work methods, order of performance of individual tasks, etc.
- Re-designing work in such a way that each group of workers is provided an identifiable unit of work and also given the authority and discretion required for completing that unit of work.
- Reducing or changing the level of supervision so that supervision becomes "supportive, concentrating on advising work groups on how to achieve their targets rather than exercising close control.
- Permitting discretion over speed of work; and
- Providing a prompt feed-back on performance.

The implications of these processes are that, an active encouragement of interaction between workers, giving them a feeling of personal responsibility for the tasks assigned to them, and promoting a thought process that would apply itself to the 'problems of work environment, would all considerably activate worker interest in his job. It concluded that a major cause of dissatisfaction of workers was the nature of their work. Further, blue-collar workers could be expected to work harder if their jobs were enriched and expanded so as to give them greater control over their work and freedom from their supervisor.

Based on the literature reviewed so far, police organization could implement a number of policies and programs to help control the stressors encountered by police personnel. Of course, not every department can, or should, attempt to implement all of the recommendations. Each department has different needs and budgetary constraints and therefore must decide what type of policies and programs best fit their particular needs. The following suggestions, however, provide a proper foundation for controlling police stress in both working and nonworking environments:

- Engaging in quality of work-life activities designed to improve communication and increase participation in decision making throughout the organization.
- Addressing workplace environmental issues including quality of equipment, work space, compensation packages, and related aspects.
- Development of training programs in stress awareness. Police should consider stress management as simply another skill to be learned and mastered as is criminal law or police procedure.
- The establishment of specific police stress programs. These programs can be part of larger departmental psychological services, or as part of an organizational health program, or as part of a general employee-assistance program.
- Establishing operational policies that are stress-reducing. Consider the effects of shift assignments and scheduling, report writing, and so forth.
- Improve management skills overall, especially in people-oriented aspects of supervision and management; include stress management skills in supervisory practice.
- Utilizing peer-counseling programs. Because peers may have already experienced many of the same problems, they are seen as invaluable sources of help to fellow officers.
- Development of support groups, which can be accomplished by taking advantage of the natural groups that already exist informally and formally within the structure.
- Establish physical fitness programs which can strengthen the individual to withstand occupational stressors. Such programs should also stress dietary issues.
- Family-involvement activities can be an important source of assistance to the officers....Spouses [who] have more knowledge about the nature of the police work and its stressors...are in a better position to actually provide support to the officers.

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Acknowledgements – Nil  
 Source of Funding – Nil  
 Conflict of Interest – Nil