



THE POLICE CULTURE AND WORK STRESS

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CHAPTER LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

1. Describe the unique aspects of police subculture
2. Analyze the factors that contribute to police subculture
3. Identify the sources of police stress
4. Discuss the effects and consequences of police stress
5. Assess the influence of police shootings and critical incidents on officers
6. Evaluate the various strategies that both organizations and individual officers can implement to mitigate the negative effects of job-related stress

■ WHAT IS CULTURE?

Professional culture exists in many arenas. Culture is the set of assumptions, beliefs, expectations, and philosophy that governs the professional's interactions, performance, and role. A professional arena may have its own unique subculture. Police administrators and the law specify the broad parameters within which officers operate, but the police subculture tells them how to go about their tasks, how hard to work, what kinds of relationships to have with their fellow officers and other categories of people with whom they interact, and how they should feel about police administrators, judges, laws, and the requirements and restrictions they impose. The police subculture also consists of the informal rules and regulations, tactics, and folklore passed from one generation of police officers to another.

The subculture may vary widely from one agency to another. Subculture may be affected by such things as crime rates, leadership values, and long-standing traditions. In a high-crime area that involves perhaps daily violence, a warrior culture may dominate and may help give rise to an “us-versus-them” environment. In a less military-like environment, a command structure may prevail where dialogue between administrators and officers is encouraged and where officers see themselves more as peacekeepers in service to the community. The potency of an agency culture varies among agencies as well. Some departments have deeply ingrained traditions, whereas others may be more dynamic and experimental. Some may welcome or even encourage a questioning attitude, whereas others may demand complete and unquestioning obedience on the part of subordinates. Even though every agency is likely to have officers who approach their work in different ways, personalities that do not fit well into an agency's culture may end up having difficulties adapting to it.

In any case, professional subculture organizes and guides the behavior of its members. Subculture is quite deliberately perpetuated through the police socialization process, which begins in the academy. An organizational culture can have many positive effects and can actually reduce anxiety and uncertainty in relationships and communicate the ideology that defines what the organization is all about.¹ The inherent uncertainty of police work, combined with the need for information control, leads to police teamwork, which in turn generates collective ties and mutual dependency.² Police subculture includes “protective, supportive, and shared attitudes, values, understandings and views of the world.”³ These shared values and attitudes are a natural outgrowth of the shared experience of policing.

However, police culture can also demand conformity and exert pressures that take a toll on its members. There are risks that individual officers and entire agencies can become too insulated and separate from the public. The us-versus-them mentality can further isolate the officer from everyone besides other officers. That isolation is both a cause of job stress and a result of it.

Combined, the effects of formal pressures and the pressures that the police subculture generates often lead police officers to experience a great deal of stress in their occupational, social, and family lives—resulting in cynicism, burnout, and a host of physical and emotional ailments. Many officers may not readily recognize the extent to which the police subculture and the pressures of the job affect the way in which they view and act toward others.

Socialization, Isolation, and the Code

The process of socialization, which creates the “blue fraternity,” begins at the police academy. The process continues throughout a police officer's career. If the subculture characterizes the public as hostile, not to be trusted, and potentially violent, this outlook requires secrecy, mutual support, and unity on the part of the police.

The social isolation of the police in turn contributes to a **code of silence** or **blue wall**—a closed police society (also referred to as the “brotherhood” or “blue fraternity”). Where this exists, there may be grave personal or professional consequences for violating it.

■ **Code of Silence (Blue Wall):** Protective, supportive, and shared attitudes, values, understandings, and views of the world associated with the police society

Exhibit 8.1

The Stigma of Being a Cop

In many cases, police officers tend to socialize with other officers (not unlike members of other occupational groups) and come to realize (unlike members of many other occupational groups) that their identities as police officers sometimes make them socially unacceptable, even when off duty. That is, in some circles at least, there is a kind of stigma attached to those who are perceived as being “too close” to police officers; and police officers themselves are sometimes suspicious of the motives of civilians who become too friendly. The dangers associated with policing often prompt officers to distance themselves from the chief source of danger—other citizens.⁶ The authority provided to police officers also separates them from other citizens. Thus, police officers are socially isolated from the public and rely on each other for support and protection from a dangerous and hostile work setting. They tend toward a strong sense of loyalty toward other officers.⁷

The more defensive that officers become in their isolation, the more entrenched the us-versus-them attitude becomes. From the outside, the police culture is often viewed negatively, and the code of silence has resulted in police officers *not* being held accountable for misconduct.⁴

Recently, intense public scrutiny has been focused on highly publicized police misconduct cases across the country, including such incidents as the Los Angeles Police Department’s Rampart corruption case or the Houston Police Department’s shooting of a Mexican immigrant. With each new headline, anxiety and mistrust of police officers and their departments increase. Police executives repeatedly find themselves confronted with the issue of the code of silence. But, how much is fact, and how much is fiction? Reality or perception?⁵

Erosion of the Public’s Trust

Apart from the extent of the code’s existence, it is certain that the public believes that it exists. Much of the public believes that officers who are guilty of wrongdoing are protected by the code of silence and are not held accountable for their actions. Regardless of whether a blue wall of silence is a reality, the belief by the public that such a protective environment exists has a negative effect on the relationships between the police and the community. The erosion of public trust in the police inhibits their ability to perform their duties. Police scandals have supporters and critics alike calling for civilian review boards and other external oversight mechanisms.

Recognizing the damage to the public trust, some departments are willing to openly look at their record of complaints. An examination of the internal affairs investigations in the Houston Police Department from 1992 to 2002 found that, in 7 of the 11 years examined, more than 50% of all the complaints investigated were generated internally—by other officers as opposed to external citizen complaints. In one year, almost two-thirds of the complaints were initiated from internal sources. These internal complaints ran the gamut from minor procedural violations to felony criminal activity.⁸

To see whether Houston’s Internal Affairs Division data were different from those of other major departments, the city’s Planning and Research Division gathered data from 15 departments of the nation’s 50 largest cities. Seven of those departments keep track of whether complaints come from internal or external sources. The seven departments are Arlington, Texas; Dallas, Texas; Baltimore, Maryland; Jacksonville, Florida; Columbus, Ohio; Memphis, Tennessee; and El Paso, Texas. These departments had numbers similar to those in Houston.⁹ These statistics would tend to indicate that the blue wall or code of silence is not as prevalent as Hollywood would have us believe.



Author Video:
The Transformation
of the LAPD and the
Work that Remans



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This patrol officer is attempting to explain to members of his department's administrative committee on traffic safety why the traffic accident he was involved in was unavoidable.

Coping

Police officers develop resources to deal with the isolation from the community and even family members, which results from job stress and the police socialization process.¹⁰

The police are human beings just like everyone else and do make mistakes. In policing, mistakes can have critical consequences. Police must continue to be trained in how to recognize and address the ethical issues they routinely encounter. "Compromising situations frequently occur without warning and with little if any time to think, and as in life-and-death situations, a wrong decision in the ethical arena can have life-changing consequences for the officer."¹¹

Ultimately, one way that police officers cope with their organizational environment is by taking a "lay low" or "cover your ass" attitude and adopting a crime-fighter or law-enforcement orientation, which tends to perpetuate the entire dynamic.¹² The establishment of a professional, moral, ethical culture in a police organization can control, prevent, and punish misconduct and corruption. Of course, this type of culture relies in part on the organization's hiring, retention, promotion practices, leadership, and socialization process for new police officers.

■ ANALYZING POLICE SUBCULTURE

The **police subculture** is a key concept in the explanation of police behavior and attitudes.¹³

Traditional characterizations of the police culture have focused on describing the shared values, attitudes, and norms created within the occupational and organizational environments of policing.¹⁴

■ **Police Subculture:** Shared values, attitudes, and norms created within the occupational and organizational environment of policing; a set of informal norms, largely based on tradition and passed on from generation to generation, that greatly influence police behavior and the perception of the public by police. Certain of these subcultural forces have a significant influence on the use of discretion, in both positive and negative ways

One observer identified “six normative orders” within policing—law, bureaucratic control, adventure or machismo, safety, competence, and morality—and concluded these orders serve as boundaries for the subculture that both justify and limit certain actions of police officers.¹⁵

Some research concerning police culture proposed the existence of different attitudinal subgroups of officers.¹⁶ Some groups of police officers represent many of the negative attitudes of the traditional culture, such as authoritarian, hard line, and aggressive. Others often have attitudes of problem solving and assisting. As police departments

POLICE STORIES

8.1

Connie Koski, Professor and Former Police Officer

Police stress is often difficult to truly understand without personal experience. It wasn't until I experienced firsthand the influences of police subculture, expectations from the public, dangerous encounters, and pressures from administrators that I began to fully comprehend how these factors could produce a toxic combination of cynicism and physical and emotional issues.

One particularly serious incident took place on a hot summer evening around the middle of my career. I was a field training officer and senior patrol officer on my shift; I felt confident in my abilities on patrol and took these roles seriously. On the night in question, I was working my fifth 12-hour shift in a row and was feeling the early signs of exhaustion. We received a call of an older Black female harassing a group of older Black men who lived in a senior citizen public housing complex. I recognized the name of the woman causing the problem. She was someone with whom I had a friendly rapport. I told my fellow officers they could remain back at the station to complete shift briefing while I responded to ask her to leave the property. I made the mistake of assuming she would comply, given our friendly relationship, but when I arrived she refused to leave and resisted arrest. As I struggled to place her in handcuffs, the woman grabbed my ink pen from my uniform pocket and began stabbing me in the neck, coming perilously close to my jugular vein. Several of the male callers, also Black, were seated in a gazebo nearby, witnessing the entire struggle. Given that I am White and always worked very hard to treat all people equitably, I made a special effort not to use a significant amount of force to subdue this woman for fear that it would appear either racist or excessive, despite the fact that I was later told by several administrators that I should have done so, given her use of near deadly violence against me. I was finally able to wrestle the woman to the ground without harming her and was able to secure her until backup arrived.

As fellow officers arrived and took custody of the woman, I suddenly and very unexpectedly burst into tears for reasons I could not explain. I was embarrassed in front of my male coworkers and couldn't understand why I was crying. I later discovered that this “adrenaline dump” is what happens to a person's body when he or she experiences sudden violent “fight or flight” situations and has no real release for the adrenaline following the de-escalation of the incident. To compound the situation, the next day I was admonished by administrators for not using deadly force against this woman (as I would have been authorized to do based on the force continuum and her actions toward me), as well as for not having taken backup with me to the call. I was personally proud of my restraint and the ability to bring the incident to a successful resolution without the use of excessive force or inappropriate language in front of other city residents, and was frustrated by the response from my superiors.

I became very cynical and resentful toward my agency's administrators as a result. This attitude became very demotivating for me over the course of the next several months. Rather than seeing this as a sign of stress, many of my superior officers simply saw this as a bad attitude and became very adversarial toward me, rather than helping me understand or seek help, compounding the problem. My behaviors were clearly the result of several years of stress. I was unable to identify it myself, because I had been socialized to believe that I could “handle” it on my own. Most police officers would be untruthful if they told you they never experienced stress at some point during their careers. Some officers ultimately leave the profession as a result of job stress. Others are so heavily indoctrinated into police culture that they resist seeking outside assistance in times of great stress and become almost incapable of recognizing their need for help.

become more heterogeneous, a single department's cohesive police culture may give way to a more multifaceted one.¹⁷ Racial minorities, women, and college-educated personnel bring different outlooks and attributes, based on past experiences, which may affect the way in which police collectively interpret the world around them.¹⁸⁻¹⁹

At the academy, a new police officer learns the laws and formal rules required before initiating a traffic stop on a motor vehicle. However, beyond these formalities, new officers quickly learn the importance of tone of voice, posture, and initial approach to a hysterical, threatening, or apologetic driver. In many cases, veteran police officers have refined, through years of traffic stops, a ritual or standard approach and accompanying explanation for almost all drivers.

There are different but related forms of organizational culture: artifacts, values, and basic assumptions.²⁰ The **artifacts** are the most visible parts of the organizational culture and include sounds, architecture, smells, behavior, attire, language, products, and ceremonies. Police culture is in part transmitted and defined by certain artifacts. For example, police recruits quickly learn police jargon, how to address superiors, how to communicate on the radio or computer, a writing style for police reports, and a host of other behaviors unique to policing.

Another police artifact is the patrol officer's uniform, which is a symbol of law and order and allows members of society to readily identify a police officer. Some departments have researched the use of blazers or a more casual form of dress to encourage police-community interactions and de-emphasize the paramilitary associations the uniform can have.

The values embedded in the organization are the most important, because they guide the behavior of the organization's members.²¹ For example, new police officers often complete months of training on the street with a field training officer or FTO, who has a pivotal role in conveying values such as respect, integrity, honesty, and fairness to a new police officer. The FTO socializes and orients new police officers, and in most cases, the trainee's career and behavioral attributes are impacted by this influence.²² However, in policing, as in many occupations, some values can set up ethical, moral, and legal conflicts.

Many police officers view themselves as teammates linked together by portable radios, cell phones, and person-to-person messaging, part of a team that is no stronger than its weakest member. As members of the team, they feel a good deal of pressure to live up to the expectations of other team members and to support the practice of secrecy.

Evidence of secrecy is clearly articulated in phrases you might hear among officers, such as "Watch out for your partner first and then the rest of the guys working," "Don't give up another cop," "Don't get involved in anything in another cop's sector," or "If you get caught off base, don't implicate anybody else."²⁶

One study reported that in many cases newer police officers were more willing to admit to viewing unethical acts, compared to police officers with more seniority. "One conclusion would be that the [longer the] length of time an officer is exposed to this socialization process, the greater its impact."²⁷

What is relevant, recruits are told, is the experience of senior officers who know the ropes or know how to get around things. Recruits are often told by officers with considerable experience to forget what they learned in the academy and in college and to start learning real police work.²⁸ Among the first lessons learned are that police officers share secrets among themselves; that these secrets, especially when they deal with activities that are questionable in terms of ethics, legality, and departmental policy, are not to be divulged to others; and that administrators often cannot be trusted. Thus, emphasis on the police occupational subculture results in many officers regarding themselves as members of a minority that has to look out for itself.²⁹

When officers hold an us-versus-them view of the world, the "us" consists of other police officers; the "them" encompasses almost everybody else. To be sure, members of



SAGE Journal Article:
An Examination of
Officers' Occupational
Attitudes

■ **Artifacts:** Most visible forms of an organizational culture (sounds, behaviors, language)

Police Discretion

Police officers have discretion in several areas of the job that include whether to issue traffic citations, whom to stop and contact, and, in some cases, which laws to enforce. For a variety of reasons, a police officer may decide to enforce the law—or not to. Almost everyone likes discretion, provided they are able to choose when, where, and how to use it. Depending on how a person is affected by an officer’s discretion, it can be seen as a good thing or as a bad thing. For example, if an officer decides to give you a break on a speeding ticket, you will probably see the officer’s discretion as something positive. On the other hand, if the officer issues you a citation for driving three miles per hour over the speed limit, your feelings about discretion may be very different.

Eliminating an officer’s discretion is one way to ensure that laws are enforced in the same ways across the board, regardless of the circumstances or the people involved. One example of eliminating officer discretion would be to require officers to issue speeding tickets to everyone caught traveling faster than the posted speed limit. This would prevent officers from considering external factors, for instance, whether the person had a legitimate medical emergency. The problem with this approach, however, is that all things are rarely equal. In other words, no two circumstances an officer will encounter are likely to be the same. Driver experience, rate of speed, weather, and traffic conditions can be very different. Therefore, while driving five miles per hour over the posted speed limit may be perfectly safe on a sunny day with dry roads, light traffic, and excellent visibility, the same speed may be dangerous when the roads are wet, visibility is poor, and traffic is heavy.

1. Do you think police officer discretion should be strictly limited? Why or why not?
2. Do you believe police officer discretion should be eliminated in certain cases? If so, under what conditions should discretion be eliminated?
3. What are the advantages to police officer discretion?

The final aspect of organizational culture involves the basic assumptions of the organization. Veteran employees of an organization may not be consciously aware of the basic assumptions that guide employee behavior.²³ These assumptions develop over the history of the organization and include many aspects of human behavior, human relationships in the organization, and relationships with the organization’s external environment. In most cases, the assumptions are unconscious and are often difficult for veteran police officers to describe to new police officers. Often police officers comprehend these assumptions by observing the behaviors of other officers in a variety of different situations. For example, there are certain **organizational assumptions** or deeply held beliefs that guide behaviors and, in turn, communicate to members of the organization how to perceive and think about things.²⁴ The police **ethos** (fundamental spirit of a culture) encompasses three concepts of the utmost importance in policing: bravery, autonomy, and secrecy.²⁵

Suggestions for addressing these questions can be found on the Student Study Site: edge.sagepub.com/coxpolicing3e

other occupational groups also develop their own subcultures and worldviews, but often not to the same extent as the police.³⁰ According to a classic text, “Set apart from the conventional world, the policeman experiences an exceptionally strong tendency to find his social identity within his occupational milieu.”³¹

Rank-and-file police officers sometimes even begin to view their administrators as dangerous outsiders to the patrol subculture and somewhat personally and professionally threatening.³² This tension between police officers and police administrators is primarily due to the discrepancy between what patrol officers are commanded to do and what they can realistically be expected to accomplish.³³

Postulates that show the us-versus-them view include the following:

- Don’t tell anybody else more than they have to know; it could be bad for you, and it could be bad for them.
- Don’t trust a new guy until you have checked him out.

Organizational Assumptions:

Deeply held beliefs that guide behaviors in an organization

Ethos: Fundamental spirit of a culture

- Don't give them (police administrators) too much activity.
- Keep out of the way of any boss from outside your precinct.
- Know your bosses.
- Don't do the bosses' work for them.
- Don't trust bosses to look out for your interests.
- Don't talk too much or too little.
- Protect your ass.³⁴



Web Link:
Putting Police
Ethics on Trial

Contributing Factors

Factors inherent in police work contribute to the tendency toward social isolation. Among these factors are danger, authority, and the need to appear efficient.³⁵

Danger

In police work, danger is always a possibility, and it is highly unpredictable, except in certain types of situations. Who knows when the traffic stop at midday will lead to an armed attack on the police officer involved? Who can predict which angry spouse involved in a domestic dispute will batter a police officer (or, for that matter, whether both spouses will)? Who knows when a sniper firing from a rooftop will direct his shots at the windshield of a patrol car? Under what circumstances will a person with a mental disorder turn on an officer attempting to assist? Will drivers approaching an intersection heed the flashing lights and siren of an officer's car? Does the fleeing young burglar have a firearm under his shirt? "The potential to become the victim of a violent encounter, the need for backup from other officers, and the legitimate use of violence to accomplish the police mandate all contribute to a subculture that stresses bravery, which is ultimately related to the perceived and actual dangers of policing."³⁶

In fact, because of the unpredictable nature of danger in policing, police officers are trained to be suspicious of most, if not all, citizens they encounter. Police are encouraged to treat them as **symbolic assailants**, to approach them in certain ways, to notify the dispatcher of their whereabouts when making a stop, and to wait for additional officers or backup to arrive before proceeding in potentially dangerous cases.³⁷ Even though violence occurs in a low percentage of police–civilian interactions, "the highly unpredictable and potentially dangerous person, who cannot be dependably identified in advance, conditions officers to treat each individual with suspicion and caution."³⁸ Examples of symbolic assailants include two men walking in a quiet residential neighborhood at 3 a.m. or a police officer receiving the description of a person approaching a subway station carrying a "suspicious package." In other words, police officers create in their mind an image of what they perceive to be the behaviors of a threatening person. This image is based on training, past experiences, and sharing of war stories by veteran officers, and it is ever changing depending on the perceived threat to the safety of the officer and the community.

There is a paradox of policing concerning the perception of danger and actual danger.³⁹ According to some research, it is not the actual danger that results in fear, but the constantly present potential for danger that has the significant impact.⁴⁰ The fear of danger by police may be both functional and dysfunctional.⁴¹ The very real hazards of police work require that police be alert to the risks of the job. However, the constant concern over danger can contribute to increased levels of stress and burnout.

During everyday contacts with the public, police officers believe they can minimize the potential danger they will confront, as well as properly display their coercive authority, by always being prepared—or "one up" on the public.⁴² One inquiry identified three types: "suspicious persons," "assholes," and "know-nothings."⁴³ Suspicious persons include those who are most likely about to commit or might have already committed an offense. The assholes include those individuals who disrespect the police and do not

■ **Symbolic Assailants:** Potentially dangerous citizens to whom police are trained to accord a level of suspicion

Constantly viewing citizens as symbolic assailants and potential threats can lead to burnout and difficulty coping with stress.



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accept the police definition of the situation. These individuals might receive some form of *street justice* or “a physical attack designed to rectify what police take as a personal insult.”⁴⁴ The know-nothings are the typical citizens who interact with the police when they request service.

Authority

Academy instructors teach police officers to assess others with whom they are involved in terms of their ability to physically handle such individuals if it becomes necessary and to be aware that in most instances their encounters with other citizens will be perceived as creating trouble for those citizens. Instructors teach officers that they work in an alien environment in which everyone knows who they are, while they lack such information about most of the people with whom they interact.⁴⁵

In addition, of course, as representatives of government, police officers are told they have specific authority to intervene in a wide array of situations. They are equipped with a Taser, a firearm, handcuffs, a portable radio, backup officers, and a uniform to be sure that their image as authority figures is complete and unmistakable. And they are told that, when dealing with a dispute in progress, their definition of the situation must prevail, and they must take charge of the situation. Police are taught that, as a part of their role, they must give orders, exercise control over law enforcement and order maintenance situations, place restraints on certain freedoms, enforce unpopular laws (even ones they do not agree with), conduct searches, make arrests, and perform a number of other duties.⁴⁶

What is not routinely stated to police officers—but what they learn very quickly on the streets—is that other citizens, not infrequently, resent their intervention. And other citizens, when treated suspiciously by the police, may react with hostility, resentment, contempt, and occasionally physical violence. Nor are police officers routinely taught that certain segments of the population hate them or hold them in contempt simply because they wear the badge and uniform. If members of these groups challenge the authority of the police, based on their training, the police will often resort to threats of force or the use of force to impose their authority, which often escalates the level of danger in the encounters. On those relatively rare occasions in which the challenge

CASE IN POINT

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Police officers see horrific things, including homicides, rapes, car accidents, and violent assaults, with some of these cases involving children and teenagers. Although some officers may become desensitized over time to certain aspects of the job, it is never easy. And, it is even more difficult to shake the lasting emotional distress that confronting these situations produces. Although we seldom hear about police officers suffering from **post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**, they suffer from it as we now know that military veterans do as well.

Retired Officer Bill Kruger has lived with PTSD ever since killing an escaped convict while on duty. The police usually think they need to “tough it out” when they are having difficulties, that being emotionally challenged is a sign of weakness. Those who do admit a problem risk being stigmatized, being relieved of their badges and guns, and having their peers and superiors assume they are a risk to themselves or others. As with most people who need help, without it, they tend to get worse.

Officer Kruger joined a peer-support group to help cope with his illness. After realizing that his situation would not be kept in confidence, and fearing that staying might jeopardize his career or opportunities for promotion, he decided to leave the group.

Untreated PTSD and other psychological illnesses can lead to drug or alcohol abuse, or even suicide. Officer Kruger acknowledges the effect his PTSD had on his personality. It made him an angry person, and he drank to alleviate his pain. The police community has precious few mental health resources available to officers; agencies retain few trained therapists or psychologists who can properly identify and address PTSD and other conditions. PTSD is sometimes delayed, and retirees may experience an onset of symptoms after they leave the force.

Police administrators need to implement consistent psychological checkups and greater attention to police officer mental health care. Only then will PTSD and other mental health problems be effectively resolved.

1. Should officers with diagnosed cases of severe PTSD be forced to retire from law enforcement? If not, what can law enforcement agencies do with these officers?
2. Do law enforcement agencies have a duty to identify and treat officers with PTSD?
3. Considering the serious nature of PTSD, why would an officer refuse to continue counseling or other treatment services?
4. Should officers be compelled to continue treatment if they do not want counseling or other services?

Source: “Toughing it out: Posttraumatic stress in police officers,” by Robert T. Muller, 2013. *Psychology Today* (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/talking-about-trauma/201302/toughing-it-out-posttraumatic-stress-in-police-officers>).

to authority is prolonged or vicious, danger may become the foremost concern of all parties involved, and the capacity to use force, including deadly force in appropriate circumstances, becomes paramount.⁴⁷ Under the circumstances, the need for police solidarity and the feelings of isolation and alienation from other citizens become apparent. Police unity bolsters officer self-esteem and confidence, which enables the police to tolerate the isolation from society and the hostility and public disapproval.⁴⁸

Performance

At the same time, we expect the police to be efficient, and the police themselves are concerned with at least giving the appearance of efficiency, if not the substance, because performance evaluations and promotions often depend on at least the former. Concerns with efficiency and the resulting pressures they produce have increased dramatically with computerization and other technological advances in the police world. Simultaneously, taxpayers have begun to demand greater accountability for the costs involved in policing and the addition of well-educated (and therefore more costly)

■ Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

(PTSD): Emotional disturbance leading to a numbing of emotions, insomnia, and depression

This officer bears the authoritarian tools of her trade.



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police personnel. The resulting “do more with less” philosophy has led many police executives to emphasize even more the importance of efficient performance. “Citizens expect professional police behavior, respectful treatment, maintenance of human dignity, responsiveness, and a high value on human life. In addition, these increasingly sophisticated taxpayers also insist that the police achieve maximum effectiveness and efficiency in the use of their tax dollars.”⁴⁹

In some cases, the police subculture has established standards of acceptable performance for officers and resists raising these standards. Officers whose performance exceeds these standards are often considered *rate-busters* and threats to those adhering to traditional expectations. For example, fueling the patrol car, in some departments, is an operation

for which the officer is expected to allot 20 to 30 minutes. Because the operation may actually take less than 5 minutes, administrators concerned about accountability, totaling the amount of time lost in this operation for, say 10 cars, recognize they are losing two to three hours of patrol time if they fail to take action to modify the fueling procedure. At the same time, however, officers concerned about accountability who wish to patrol an additional 15 to 20 minutes and fuel the car in less time make those officers adhering to the 20- to 30-minute standard look bad, and they are under considerable pressure to conform to the established standard. Similar expectations and conflicts exist with respect to the number of drunk drivers who can be processed in a shift, the number of felonies that may be processed, the number of subpoenas that may be served, or the number of prisoners who may be transported. Officers must make choices as to whose expectations

Exhibit 8.2

The Police Subculture

The police subculture creates a set of truths, according to which officers are expected to live. Note that there is some basis in fact for each of these subcultural truths and that each makes integration and communication between the police and the citizens they serve more difficult.

- The police are the only real crime fighters.
- No one understands the nature of police work but fellow officers.
- Loyalty to colleagues counts more than anything else.
- It is impossible to win the war on crime without bending the rules.
- Other citizens are unsupportive and make unreasonable demands.
- Patrol work is only for those who are not smart enough to get out of it.⁵⁰

are to be met and sometimes operate in a no-win situation, in which meeting one set of expectations automatically violates the other, leaving the officer under some stress no matter how he or she operates.

The Police Personality: How Real?

Some have suggested that the impact of police work and the police subculture itself lead to the development of a distinctive **police personality**.⁵¹ The police personality has been conceived as a combination of characteristics and behaviors—a stereotype of the police. Often, these characteristics include a “desire to be in control of the situation, assertions, cynicism, authoritarian attitude, a wish to be aloof from citizens, an increased solidarity with other police officers and a tendency to be physically aggressive.”⁵² How does such a personality develop? Is it a matter of an individual innately possessing those personality characteristics, or does it develop from the work itself?⁵³ Some believe policing attracts individuals who possess a certain type of personality, while others propose that the exposure to violence, corruption, and danger creates an elusive personality. On the positive side, one study reported that police applicants differ from the general population in several positive ways: “They are more psychologically healthy than the normative population, as they are generally less depressed and anxious, and more assertive and interested in making and maintaining social contacts.”⁵⁴

“There is some evidence for the existence of a police working personality. Most of the evidence points to the influence of socialization and experiences after becoming a police officer as the main source of the unique traits.”⁵⁵

Although some of the research on police personalities does appear to distinguish certain traits, no one has been able to “disentangle the effects of a person’s socioeconomic background from the demands that police work and its subculture places upon individual officers.”⁵⁷ The research does not support the existence of a single dominant personality type among police officers. “There is no evidence for such a thing as a typical police personality showing a cluster of traits that is constant across time and space.”⁵⁸

■ TYPES OF STRESSES IN POLICE WORK

As previously mentioned, the formal police organization and the police subculture both contribute to the stress levels experienced by police. The effects of formal pressure from police organizations and pressures generated by the police subculture often lead police to experience a great deal of stress in their occupational, social, and family lives, resulting at times in cynicism, burnout, and retirement on the job, as well as a host of physical and emotional ailments. Also, those police officers who reported higher levels of stress reported more acts of deviance. Correspondingly, as the stress levels of police officers were reduced through reassignment from high-stress duties, the reported deviance decreased.⁵⁹

Although there does not appear to be a cluster of personality traits that distinguish police officers from other occupational groups, there is no doubt that the nature of police work and the subculture in which it occurs creates difficulties for officers, their families,

■ **Police Personality:**
Combination of characteristics and behaviors that are used to stereotype the police

Exhibit 8.3

Working Personalities

One system of categorization identifies four working personalities of police: enforcers, idealists, realists, and optimists. Enforcers emphasize the law enforcement function, while idealists focus on individual rights. Realists place little emphasis on social order and individual rights. Optimists view policing as an opportunity to help people.⁵⁶

and their friends. The need to perform under stress is a concern in many professions; policing may not be as stressful as some other occupations such as brain surgery or even teaching. Nevertheless, stress is one of the most common of all occupational hazards for police and can be extremely debilitating, leading to early onset of stress-related illness.⁶⁰ Police stress may manifest in a variety of ways.⁶¹

Of course, the cost associated with a stressful event is a function of how each individual perceives the event.⁶² What may be viewed as very threatening to one police officer may be perceived as simply an exciting challenge by another. Those individuals who are capable of venting their feelings and discharging their emotions do not suffer as much from stressful events.⁶³

Research on police stress has focused on the sometimes violent nature of the work and the organizational structures found in almost all police agencies.⁶⁴

One top-ranked stressor was concern for fellow police officers being injured or killed.⁶⁵ Other research failed to demonstrate a clear association between the dangers of police work and the level of stress that officers experience.⁶⁶ A segment of research suggests police officers are “no more stressed than other groups and police work is not especially stressful.”⁶⁷

The quasi-military nature associated with some police organizations often breeds alienation among street officers, who are required to use high levels of discretion while being tightly controlled by supervisors and administrative rules.⁶⁸ Cops have strict guidelines, and they are dealing with people who are not governed by any rules at all. Additional stressors included public criticism, family demands, career stages, and working the late shift.⁶⁹

To the list of stressors we might add excessive paperwork, red tape, discrimination, lack of participation in decision making, and competition for promotion, among others. One study used saliva and blood samples from police officers to examine their levels of cortisol, which is often referred to as a “stress hormone.” The research revealed that police officers “who work the graveyard and swing shifts are more likely to be tired” and have a high rate of injuries, compared to those officers assigned to the day shift.⁷⁰

One study found new and more severe sources of stress for police: increased scrutiny and criticism from the media and the public, and anxiety and loss of morale as a result of layoffs and reduced salary raises.⁷¹ Even positive changes, such as the movement to community-oriented policing, have caused increased levels of stress for many officers. Today, the increasing response to or the threat of terrorism is also a job-related stressor.⁷²

The sources of stress can break down into four categories in organizations—task demands, role demands, interpersonal demands, and physical demands.⁷³

Task Demands

Task demands or the lack of them can impose high stress levels on police. Quantitative input overload is a result of too many demands for the time allotted, while qualitative input overload is the result of complexity and limited time.⁷⁴ These two types of input overload can lead to **hyperstress**. Quantitative overload occurs when police officers experience stacking of calls or when they receive more calls than they can answer. Emergency calls are prioritized by 911 systems, but minor theft cases, criminal damage to property cases, trespassing violations, and other nonemergency calls are answered in order. An officer on a busy shift might respond to 25 calls for service, with little time for patrol or personal breaks. Obviously, with this number of calls, the quality of the police interaction with the public can suffer. Investigators assigned a large number of cases more readily experience quality overload. Each case must follow case management criteria and may include interviews, interrogations, evidence collection, search warrants, and numerous reports. The number of cases that supervisors assign and the pressure that prosecutors generate to complete an investigation affect the quality of investigation and the extent of overload experienced by individual officers.



Author Video:

How do law enforcement identify and know when officers are under stress? How do law enforcement approach and guide officers to handle stress?

■ **Hyperstress:**

An overload resulting from too many complex demands for the time allotted

Low levels of mental and physical activity cause **hypostress**, which is the result of too little quantitative and qualitative input.⁷⁵ Police officers experience high levels of boredom when they work a shift with no calls, when their only activity is random patrol and personal breaks. Answering service call requests—one of the primary roles of a police officer—is often seen by officers as routine, mundane, and boring.

Role Demands

Role demands develop two types of role stress in the work environment: role conflict and role ambiguity.⁷⁶ **Role conflict** is a result of the inconsistent or incompatible expectations. A role conflict can occur when society's expectations of police behavior conflict with certain police principles, beliefs, and behaviors. For example, for many decades, society has condemned the use and sale of illegal drugs. However, the police are limited in their ability to successfully reduce drug sales and trafficking due to many factors outside their sphere of influence, such as search and seizure laws, drug legalization, and limited resources.

Cops must avoid the harsh glare of the external observation which would reveal (1) that they were frequently in violation of the law, and (2) that they were doing exactly what the public wanted them to do, generating arrests for drugs the only way they can—fabricating evidence, dropsy, lying on the witness stand, entrapment—in a word, by being more criminally sophisticated than the criminals.⁷⁷

Thus, the perceptions of society and the actual behaviors of police performing undercover drug enforcement can generate high levels of stress, especially for police who must become a part of the drug culture, appear in court as a professional police officer, and still maintain relationships with spouses, children, and other family members.

Role ambiguity is the confusion a person experiences related to the expectations of others.⁷⁸ For example, the police are seen by the public as “alertly ready to respond to citizen demands, as crime-fighters, as an efficient, bureaucratic, highly organized force that keeps society from falling into chaos.”⁷⁹ However, this is an exaggeration of actual police work. Police work resembles other kinds of work in that it can be boring, tiresome, mentally draining, or technically demanding. It is not always dangerous. And to add to the role confusion, the public has demanded an even higher level of the crime-fighting activities, which are grossly exaggerated in books, movies, electronic games, and television shows.

Interpersonal Demands

Abrasive personalities, sexual harassment, and the leadership style in the organization are examples of interpersonal demands.⁸⁰ Even with general support by the public, police typically encounter individuals with abrasive personalities. Many citizens feel the police are just a little above the evil they fight or believe that the police are against them and misuse their right to use force to uphold the law.⁸¹ The police often perceive the public as extremely harsh critics, leading to increased levels of occupational stress.

In most cases, besides the on-duty demands on police officers, there are also off-duty requirements that affect the stress levels of officers and their families. For example, language similar to the following can be found in most police department policy manuals: “A police officer’s character and conduct while off duty must be exemplary, and maintain a position of respect in the community.”⁸² To an extent, police are never off duty, which adds to high levels of stress in police officers and their families.

Management or leadership styles play an important role in work environment stress levels. There are significant differences in employee stress levels depending on management styles.⁸³ One study revealed that management styles were one of the primary predictors of stress in employees. This is especially true in police organizations that are characteristically authoritarian but attract college-educated personnel.

■ **Hypostress:**

Low levels of mental or physical activity

■ **Role Conflict:**

The result of inconsistent or incompatible expectations being communicated to a person

■ **Role Ambiguity:**

Confusion a person experiences related to expectations of others

Physical Demands

Extreme environments, strenuous activities, and hazardous substances create physical demands for people in the workplace. Figure 8.1 illustrates the most common types of serious injuries incurred by police officers. The six types of injuries exhibited in the table account for 89% of all injuries to police officers and investigators. Figure 8.2 indicates the types of calls police officers respond to that led to 76.5% of all injuries described in Figure 8.1. The figures include police officer contact with blood-borne pathogens, which is rarely discussed and includes exposures to relatively minor disease as well as far more serious diseases, such as hepatitis or HIV.

Figure 8.1 ■ Most Common Types of Injuries Incurred by Police Officers

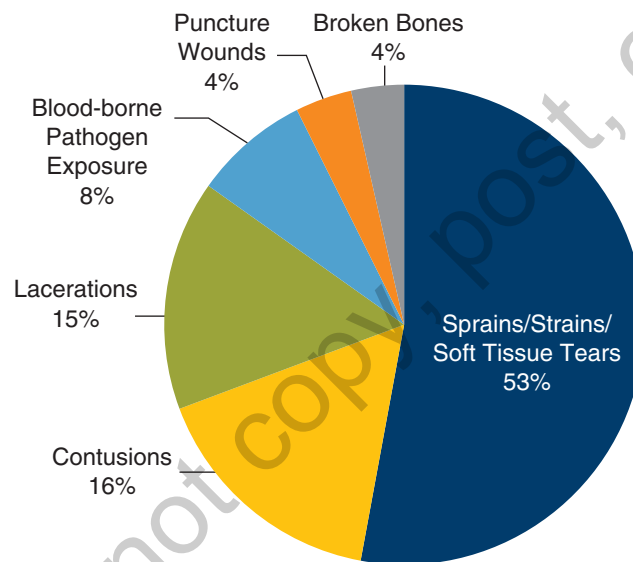
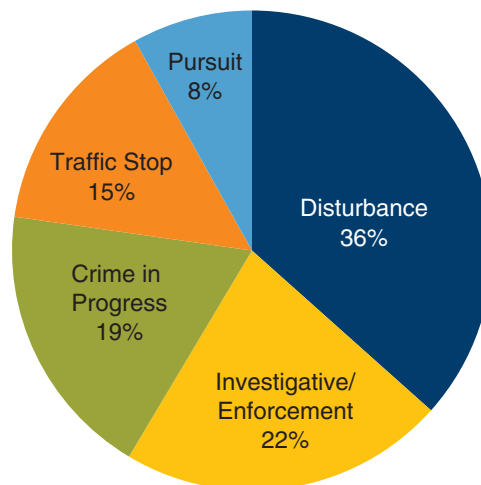


Figure 8.2 ■ Most Common Call Types That Result in Injuries to Police Officers



Source: Reducing Officer Injuries: FINAL REPORT. The IACP Center For Officer Safety & Wellness, Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2009

Although generally believed to be a very high-stress occupation, more recent research suggests a more moderate environment.⁸⁴ This may be due in part to different hiring processes, stress-reduction training classes, and individual characteristics of the officers. However, on a regular basis, police are exposed to situations that other members of society rarely experience.

■ EFFECTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF POLICE STRESS

In 2000, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) concluded that police were experiencing new levels of stress based on a perceived increase in public scrutiny, adverse publicity, and a perceived decline in police camaraderie. Fear of contracting air- and blood-borne diseases (e.g., TB, HIV, and hepatitis), the focus on cultural diversity and political correctness, and the transition to community policing also increased stress levels.⁸⁵ Furthermore, these stressors have serious emotional and physical effects on police. The average age of death of a police officer is 67, which is approximately 10 years younger than the average life expectancy for all men in the United States.⁸⁶

Exhibit 8.4

Categories of Stressors

Stressors experienced by police fall into the following five major categories:

- **Internal stressors:** those originating within the organization, poor supervision, absence of career development opportunities, inadequate reward system, offensive policies, and paperwork
- **External stressors:** absence of career development (not able to transfer to another department), jurisdictional isolation, seemingly ineffective corrections system, courts, distorted press accounts, derogatory remarks, and adverse government actions
- **Performance stressors:** role conflict, adverse work schedules, fear and danger, sense of uselessness, and absence of closure
- **Individual stressors:** feeling overcome by fear and danger, and pressures to conform
- **Effects of critical incidents**⁸⁷

Another typology lists seven police stressors that selectively interact with a police officer's job activities, decision making, and organizational life:

- **Life-threatening stressors:** ever-present potential of injury or death
- **Social isolation stressors:** cynicism, isolation, and alienation from the community; prejudice and discrimination
- **Organizational stressors:** administrative philosophy, changing policies and procedures, morale, job satisfaction, and misdirected performance measures
- **Functional stressors:** role conflict, use of discretion, and legal mandates
- **Personal stressors:** police officer's off-duty life, including family, illness, problems with children, marital stresses, and financial constraints
- **Physiological stressors:** fatigue, medical conditions, and shift-work effects
- **Psychological stressors:** possibly activated by all of the above and the exposure to repulsive situations⁸⁸

Personal Pitfalls

Desensitization

Many departments train their officers in handling physical confrontations. Part of this training involves deliberately desensitizing officers out of a natural tendency to avoid either receiving or inflicting physical blows. To be able to maintain control in physically combative situations, officers need to be able to engage and not be hindered by their personal inhibitions. However, the psychological desensitization to trauma can have an ill effect on the officer as an individual and on his or her professional performance. As one officer put it:

There is a process called occupational socialization that includes the organizationally informal dynamics of becoming blue, for example desensitization and detachment. It is the reason we do not cry over dead bodies or beat child molesters as opposed to reading them their rights. One of the tragedies, yet defense mechanisms this profession “gifts” us with is the ability to separate ourselves from the horrors we see for the sake of getting the paperwork completed.⁸⁹

The consequences of stress and desensitization reported by police include cynicism, suspicion, and emotional detachment from everyday life. In addition, stress leads to reduced efficiency, increased absenteeism, and early retirement, as well as excessive aggressiveness, alcoholism, and other substance abuse. Marital and family problems (extramarital affairs, divorce, domestic violence) and PTSD are additionally related to stress.⁹⁰

■ Prejudice:

Unfavorable attitudes toward a group or individual not based on experience or fact; a feeling about a person or persons based on faulty generalizations

■ **Stress:** Occurs when an event involves a constraint, opportunity, or excessive physical or psychological demand

■ **General Adaptation Syndrome:** Stages of stress experienced by a person after the exposure to stressors

Prejudice

Over the years, the literature on the police has characterized them as more authoritarian and prejudiced than other occupational groups. Authoritarian personalities tend to be conservative, rigid, punitive, and inflexible, and they tend to emphasize authority and rules.⁹² **Prejudice** (in this case, unfavorable attitudes toward a group or individual not based on experience or fact) appears to be more common among those with authoritarian traits. Prejudiced individuals tend to develop and adhere to stereotypes based on race, ethnicity, occupational group, and other factors. Police actions based on such stereotypes are discriminatory and clearly inappropriate in a democratic society. Because these stereotypes and prejudices are *attitudes* and are difficult to directly observe, they are also difficult, if not impossible, to eliminate. Discriminatory *actions*, however, are more easily observed, and steps to prevent such actions can and must be taken. The extent to which prejudices and stereotypes translate into discriminatory action remains a question, though there is no doubt that it does sometimes happen.

Exhibit 8.5

Positive Effects of Stress

Stress need not always be harmful. In fact, moderate stress appears to be positively related to productivity. Elimination of all stress is neither possible nor desirable. However, the effects of prolonged high levels of stress are clearly associated with dysfunction, producing both debilitating psychological and physical symptoms. In part, the damage caused by stress occurs because of the **general adaptation syndrome**.⁹¹

In the first stage of this syndrome, the body prepares to fight stress by releasing hormones that lead to an increase in respiration and heartbeat. In the second stage, the body attempts to resist the stressor and repair any damage that has occurred. If the stress continues long enough and cannot be successfully met through flight or fight, then the third stage, exhaustion, occurs. Repeated exposure to stressors that cannot be eliminated or modified by the organism eventually leads to stage three.

These characterizations may be based in part on the previous history of the police. The 1960s was a time of civil unrest and of protests against the police amid accusations of police brutality. Recent changes in policing have had a significant impact on the characterization of the police personality and culture. These changes include more diverse police organizations, more educated police officers, and technical sophistication.⁹³ In addition, because of the changes in the police role, departments began seeking officers with the personalities and characteristics that were consistent with quality-of-life issues and problem-solving expertise.⁹⁴ One of the main reasons for the changes in today's police culture may be the implementation of community-oriented policing, which has dissolved some of the barriers between the police and the community.⁹⁵

Early research found essentially no differences between police officers and those in other occupations with respect to either authoritarianism or prejudice, and studies have found police officers to be intelligent, emotionally stable, and service oriented.⁹⁶ In fact, a later study found that years of service as a police officer did not create increased levels of authoritarianism, which runs counter to the "popular belief that years on the job will 'harden' police officers and lead to negative attitudes and traits."⁹⁷

Cynicism

Cynicism is another feature of the police officer's working personality that is addressed by students of the police. **Cynicism** involves the loss of faith in people, of enthusiasm for police work, and of pride and integrity.⁹⁸ Some contend that cynicism peaks in the 7th to 10th year of police service, and the level of cynicism varies with the organizational style of the department and the type of department (urban or rural).⁹⁹ "Although most individuals entering police work are idealistic, service-oriented, and outgoing, by about the fifth year in the profession some officers tend to develop attitudes that are cynical, defensive, alienated, authoritarian, and often racist."¹⁰⁰ What causes the changes in a police officer's personality that result in these types of attitudes? Some think it is related to the reality of big-city streets, high crime rates, and anonymity, while others suggest it has to do with length of tenure or socialization.¹⁰¹

Within different police subcultures, cynicism is thought to involve different issues, including the public, the police administration, the courts, training and education, dedication to duty, and police solidarity.¹⁰² The study of police cynicism reached its zenith in the 1980s, and it has slowed since, leaving many questions unresolved.¹⁰³

■ **Cynicism:** In this context, involves a loss of faith in people or loss of enthusiasm for police work

Burnout

Gradually, officers may become disillusioned, bored, frustrated, and later apathetic. Each of the stages entails a variety of stressors. The lack of an appropriate way to relieve stress may lead to **burnout**, which is characterized by emotional exhaustion and cynicism.

■ **Burnout:** Exhaustion and cynicism resulting from repeated exposure to high levels of stress

Exhibit 8.6

Four Stages That Lead to Police Cynicism

- Stage One—pseudo cynicism: New recruits are idealistic; their desire is to "help people."
- Stage Two—romantic cynicism: Involves the first five years of police work; these officers are the most vulnerable to cynicism.
- Stage Three—aggressive cynicism: Failures and frustrations, resentment, and hostility are obvious and prevalent at the 10th-year mark.
- Stage Four—resigned cynicism: Detachment, passiveness, and acceptance of the flaws of the system characterize seasoned officers.¹⁰⁴

Individuals unable to cope with stressors reflected in psychological, behavioral, and physical symptoms are said to manifest burnout.¹⁰⁵ Repeated exposure to high levels of stress results in emotional exhaustion, which is often followed by depersonalization of relationships as a coping response. Police who suffer from this level of stress tend to view victims and complainants as case numbers and have little empathy or individual attention for them. An additional contributor to burnout is the fact that police often suppress their emotions. This begins when new recruits observe police academy instructors, field training officers, and veteran officers, and they learn or are told directly to control and hide their emotions, particularly when they are in public view.¹⁰⁶ This control is referred to as displaying a “courtroom face.” In general, most believe that police officers exhibit higher rates of burnout compared to other types of occupations.¹⁰⁷

An advanced stage of burnout involves reduced personal accomplishment, in which the officer loses interest in the job, his or her performance declines, and motivation is lacking. It is important that police administrators understand the implications of burnout, because research has revealed that elevated levels of stress and associated burnout in police officers can decrease job performance.¹⁰⁸

Officers who experience such stress sometimes turn to alcohol or other drugs, physical aggression, and even suicide in attempting to alleviate it (see below). The literature has theorized that police officers consume more alcohol than the general population.¹⁰⁹ Most believe the consumption of alcohol by police is related to stress or social camaraderie issues. However, one survey of officers revealed drinking levels equivalent to those reported by the general population.¹¹⁰

Stress and Police Families

Some studies have focused on the effects of police work on the police family. A police officer’s level of emotional exhaustion was shown to be related to the level of job satisfaction, depersonalization, and marital distress.¹¹¹ Furthermore, domestic violence committed by police officers against their intimate partners occurred at the same rate when compared to the general population.¹¹² However, apart from the fact that most families will

Exhibit 8.7

A Day in the Life

An example of the incidents occurring in the first few hours of a police officer’s tour of duty will help clarify the stressors to which officers are routinely subjected. Shortly after reporting “in service,” the officer receives a call that another officer requires immediate assistance. The officer who responds to the call for help turns on red lights and siren and drives as rapidly as possible to reach a colleague. On the way, he prepares for the possibility of a physical struggle or armed resistance, and the physical changes described are taking place. The officer is tense and excited, but also frightened. The fear experienced may have to do with anticipation about what will happen when he arrives at the scene, but it also has to do with what other drivers, noting the red lights and siren—or failing to note them—will do. Will they yield at intersections? Will they pull off to the right? Will they pull to the left? Will they stop in the middle of the street? Will they slow down or speed up? What will happen if the officer is involved in an accident?

Arriving at the scene, the officer finds the situation under control, a suspect in custody, and the colleague uninjured. As the officer gets back into the patrol car, another call comes from the dispatcher. This call involves an accident with serious injuries. The officer proceeds to the scene (with the same set of concerns about arriving safely). As the first emergency officer to arrive, he finds that several people have been seriously injured and an infant killed. After the accident has been handled, the officer gets into the police vehicle and is told to come to the station to meet with the chief. His concerns on the way are somewhat different but perhaps equally stressful. For the next several hours and, in some cities, for the next several days, weeks, and years, these scenarios are repeated. The ups and downs of police work take their toll, and the officer experiences repeated stress, anxiety, and perhaps burnout.

A study in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, revealed high levels of anxiety, depression, and stress among police officers. The 2012 study indicated that “female officers, married officers, officers with more years of service, officers with low ranks and officers who work in urban areas have higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress than male officers, married officers, officers with fewer years of service and officers with high ranks and officers working in rural areas.”

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Police agree that police officers often face “stress-producing situations.” As an example, “terrorists have no qualms about threatening police officers with death . . . and those threats sometimes extend to their families.” In some cases, they have seen significant turnover of police officers, and others have lost their commitment to the job. In 2012, there was an attempt to reduce the levels of stress experienced by police. Many have suggested stress counseling, improved safety, and the addition of training related to stress management.

Source: “Study finds KP police suffer from psychological pressures,” by S. A. Abbas (2012). *Central Asian Online*

not air dirty laundry, domestic violence by police officers was often not detected, due to the officer’s strong adherence to a code of secrecy, commitment to camaraderie, and resistance to external intrusion.¹¹³ Similarly, individuals who marry a police officer marry into the police family and are expected to follow the values and norms of the subculture.¹¹⁴

There are so many experiences unique to the field of policing that those outside it may find it difficult to understand. Allegiance to the subculture can become almost stronger than the officer’s family relationships.¹¹⁵

Family-related stress has the potential to adversely affect the job performance of employees. Police officers not experiencing job stress can be adversely affected by problems in the home environment. Several sources of stress commonly cited by police officers’ spouses are as follows:

- Shift work and overtime
- Concern over the spouse’s cynicism, or need to feel in control in the home
- Inability or unwillingness to express feelings
- Fear that the officer will be hurt or killed in the line of duty
- Police officer’s excessively high expectations of his or her children
- Avoidance, teasing, or harassment of the officer’s children by other children because the parent is a police officer
- Presence of a weapon in the residence
- Perception the police officer prefers to spend time with other officers rather than with the family
- Perception the officer is paranoid, excessively vigilant, and overprotective
- Problems in helping the officer cope with work-related problems
- Critical incidents or officer’s injury or death on the job¹¹⁶

The police profession can intrude in various ways into intimate family relationships, disrupting the well-being of marriage and family life. The danger of police work causes fear among family members for the safety of their loved one in uniform. The schedule can entail odd hours and overtime, which complicates family logistics. Spouses may resent the “secret society” nature of the work and the off-limits topics of conversation. Police families can also become the targets of media scrutiny and have to bear that invasion of privacy.¹¹⁷



Policing in Practice Video:

How do you identify and handle police stress in your department? How do you address relationships with family and friends?

Police Officer Suicide

Research suggests that personality and situational factors often interact and determine the way the individual experiences and reacts to stress. In some cases, severe stress can lead to suicide.¹¹⁸

In a profession where strength, bravery, and resilience are revered, mental health issues and the threats of officer suicide are often “dirty little secrets”—topics very few want to address or acknowledge. Our refusal to speak openly about the issue perpetuates the stigma many officers hold about mental health issues—the stigma that depression, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide are signs of weakness and failure, not cries for help.¹¹⁹

Research on Police Suicide

Despite fairly extensive literature on the subject, many questions persist about the prevalence of police suicide.¹²⁰ Although it is very difficult to measure, some estimate that the officer suicide rate is significantly higher than that of the general population. The question of whether the police are at a greater risk for suicide than the average citizen is a potent one. Researchers attempt to answer the question of whether policing contributes to suicide. A 2014 report on the subject analyzed data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and a 2012 National Study of Police Suicides. It claims that police officers died twice as often by suicide than in traffic accidents or as a result of felonious assault.¹²¹ Other researchers conducted a meta-analysis of published suicide rates in law enforcement officers and concluded that they are *less* likely to complete suicide than an age-, race-, and gender-matched population.¹²²

Thus, research on this subject has brought in mixed and inconclusive results. It is even uncertain about how to properly measure suicide among police; and there is suspected underreporting, for example, due to the social stigma of suicide.¹²³ Also, it is difficult to design a proper methodology with a meaningful comparison group.

The police population does not mirror the “general population” in gender, age, employment, or ethnic aspects; therefore, comparing suicide rates of the general public and police may be deceptive.¹²⁴ Differences between these two groups include personality traits such as machismo, being over 21 years of age, access to firearms, and working in urban areas.

Besides the stress of police work, other factors contribute to police suicides. Among these are abuse of alcohol and drugs, involvement in deviance and corruption, depression, and (for women) working in a male-dominated organization. Family and economic problems, alienation, and cynicism associated with the police culture; role conflict; and physical and mental health problems are other contributing problems.¹²⁵

Suicide ideation, planning a suicide, and attempts to commit suicide were more likely to occur when individuals were exposed to the suicide of another person.¹²⁶ In most cases, police are among the first responders at the scene of a suicide and are required to perform an investigation. Thus, police officers have a much higher exposure to the act of suicide compared to the general population.

In any case, suicide among officers is a problem, given that the majority of officers are psychologically screened prior to hiring and are, by definition, employed and insured populations—which one might think would reduce suicide risk.

The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) recommends the following measures for departments to reduce the risk of suicide among their officers.

- Recruit leaders who care about the mental wellness of their officers and who unequivocally endorse physical and mental wellness parity as critical to a resilient and healthy police force.
- Recruit and hire resilient officers who have demonstrated a commitment to public service and proven stress management skills.

- Establish and institutionalize effective early warning and intervention protocols to identify and treat at-risk officers, for example, by launching awareness campaigns on what to look for and whom to call when officers may be in a mental health crisis or suffering from clinical anxiety or chronic depression.
- Audit existing psychological services and determine whether they are effective in identifying early warning signs of mental wellness issues, including mental illness and suicidal behavior, and in treating at-risk officers.
- Invest in training agency-wide on mental health awareness and stress management.
- Begin mental wellness training at the academy and continue the training throughout officers' careers, with a particular emphasis on first-line supervisors.
- Include family training to reinforce and invest in those critical family connections.
- Establish clear post-event protocols to implement and follow when officers die by suicide.

■ POLICE SHOOTINGS AND CRITICAL INCIDENTS

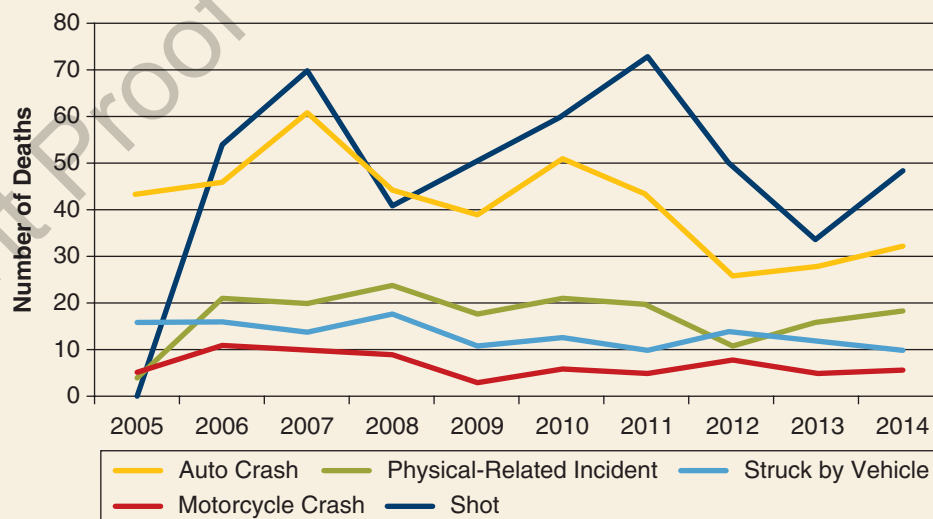
According to preliminary data for 2014, 126 law enforcement officers died in the line of duty in the United States, which is a 24% increase over 2013 (102).¹³⁰ Firearms-related incidents were the leading cause of death among officers; there were 50 such deaths in 2014, which represents a 56% increase over 2013 (32). Traffic-related

Exhibit 8.8

Law Enforcement Officer Deaths, 2014

According to the National Law Enforcement Officer Memorial Fund, 117 law enforcement officers died in the line of duty in the United States in 2014.¹²⁷ Firearms-related incidents were the leading cause of death among officers; there were 48 such deaths in 2014.¹²⁸ Auto incidents were the second most frequent cause of death in 2014, killing 32.¹²⁹

Most Common Causes of Law Enforcement Officer Deaths, 2005–2014



Source: National Law Enforcement Officer Memorial Fund, "Causes of Law Enforcement Deaths"



Web Link:
We Are Not Damaged
Goods (Officer PTSD)

incidents were the second most frequent cause of deaths in 2014, killing 49, which is an 11% increase over 2013 (44).¹³¹ (See Figure 8.3.)

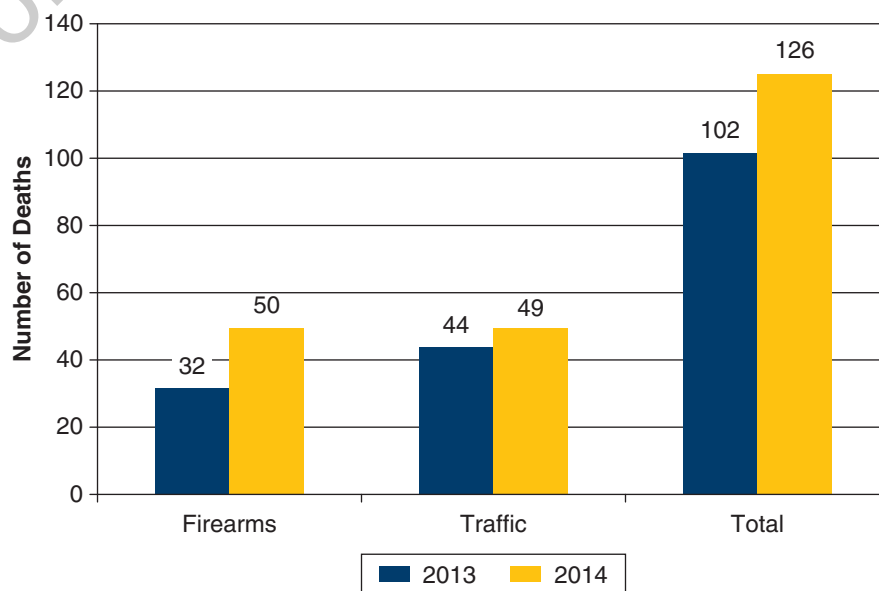
The stress of actually being involved in a shooting, whether as shooter or victim, is very real. In many cases, prior research argued that officers involved in a shooting experienced PTSD. Symptoms associated with this psychological condition include inability to be intimate, sleep disorders, nightmares, feelings of guilt, and reliving the event.¹³² However, earlier research from the NIJ found that few police officers involved in shooting incidents suffer long-term negative emotional or physical effects. In fact, “following about one-third of the shootings, officers reported feelings of elation that included joy at being alive, residual excitement after a life-threatening situation, and satisfaction of pride in proving their ability to use deadly force appropriately.”¹³³ Given that officers experience a variety of reactions to traumatic events, the training they receive in preparation for their possible exposure to trauma should also encompass the range of reactions.

Death, extreme physical abuse, and fear of the unknown have significant effects on the physical and mental health of police. For example, after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, approximately 33% of the police officers and firefighters involved with this natural disaster “reported either depressive symptoms or symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or both.”¹³⁴ The top five traumatic events for police officers involve the following:

- Child abuse
- Killing of an innocent person
- Conflict with regulations
- Domestic violence calls
- Hurting a fellow police officer¹³⁵

A more recent study confirmed that the largest stressor for police involved crime and incidents against children. For example, a police officer responding to a trouble call finds that the father has shot his two young children, his wife, and then himself. The public will read only a short abstract about this tragedy in the newspaper, but the image of the young child gripping her doll just before being shot in the head with a shotgun by her father will remain with the officer forever.¹³⁶

Figure 8.3 ■ Causes of On-Duty Police Officer Deaths



A **critical incident** is a traumatic event that has a stressful impact sufficient enough to overwhelm the otherwise effective coping skills of an individual.¹³⁷ Almost every police officer will experience a marked reaction during and after a critical incident. Examples of critical incidents include officer-involved shootings, hostage standoffs, a mass suicide, an infant at the bottom of a pool, a family trapped in a burning vehicle, school shootings, and natural disasters.¹³⁸ Additional examples of critical incident hazards include terrorist bombings, exposure to toxic chemicals, and biological or radiation hazards.¹³⁹

The San Jose Police Department considers it important to have a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing Team to address such occurrences.¹⁴⁰ For example, from 1972 to 1987, when the team did not exist, 52 police officers were involved in shootings, and 17 left the department. However, after creation of the team, 122 officers were involved in shootings, and none left the department. Obviously, a number of limitations exist that could have affected the outcomes of this comparison, such as training and individual differences among officers. See Figure 8.4 for a breakdown of the circumstances of fatal shootings of officers.

■ COUNTERACTING POLICE STRESS

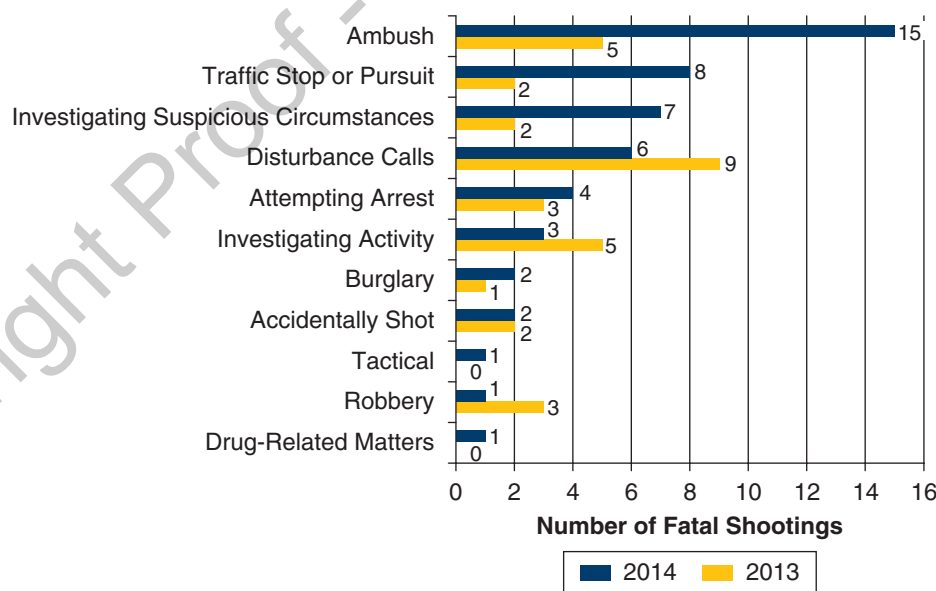
If stress and its consequences are an inherent part of the work of policing, then handling it appropriately so that it does not become a larger problem—either for the individual officer or for the department—should also be thought of as an inherent part of the job. To the extent that departments have recognized that police work can exact a high toll in personal costs, they have made numerous attempts to identify and lessen the impact of such stress.

There is no exact formula for stress reduction. Individuals differ markedly in the events they define as stressful, in the ways they react to pressure, and in what is effective for them for dealing with stressful events.¹⁴¹ Higher education and critical reflection by police on their career show great promise for alleviating or mitigating the symptoms of burnout.¹⁴²

It is apparent that stress-reduction training should be provided early in a police officer's career. This can be performed during the initial training period, because police recruits

■ **Critical Incident:**
An event that has a stressful impact sufficient to overwhelm the effective coping skills of a person

Figure 8.4 ■ Circumstances of Fatal Shootings of Officers, 2013, 2014



Source: Preliminary 2013 Law Enforcement Officers Deaths

The photo shows the aftermath of the off-duty officer who took his own life, one of the most serious consequences of police burnout.



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are a “captive audience,” and because the information may remain with them throughout their entire police career.¹⁴³ However, recruit training may not be the most effective time or approach, because most academy attendees are not experienced enough to recognize the stresses of the job. The optimal time to reach a new police officer may be after he or she has worked the street for six to eight months.

Individual police officers often either fail to recognize the signs of stress or fail to seek help when they do recognize the symptoms. This may be due, in part, to the influence of the police subculture, which holds that “real” police officers can handle their own problems and do not need the help of “shrinks,” employee assistance programs, clergy, or other outsiders.¹⁴⁴

To the extent that stress results from discrepancies between the official expectations of police administrators and the unofficial expectations of the police subculture, these discrepancies need to be confronted. Because both official and subcultural expectations will continue to play roles in policing, efforts must be made to reduce existing differences between the two. Revisions to administrative policies that frustrate and create stress for officers can be beneficial.

Officer suicide is perhaps the most significant and urgent reason to address the consequences of job stress. The causes of suicide by police officers are complex and involve a number of factors. Most prevention programs for police involve some type of suicide awareness classes, training to identify “signs” in coworkers, support for employee assistance programs, critical incident stress debriefing, and often some form of mandatory counseling.¹⁴⁵ In the future, police departments may want to open up frank discussions about mental health and alcoholism and encourage officers to get annual voluntary and confidential mental health checks.

It behooves police organizations to directly face the effects of stressful work conditions in the interests of the officer, the department, the officer’s family, and the public. These are some of the ways that administrators can help police officers better manage the stresses they encounter:



Video Link:
Beyond Ferguson:
Warriors to Guardians

1. Provide employee assistance programs, including services to officers and families
2. Require orientation programs for the new officer's transition into the police culture
3. Emphasize physical conditioning during pre-academy programs
4. Teach coping mechanisms related to crime, death, and boredom¹⁴⁶

The Melbourne Police Department in Florida is an example of an agency that has developed a stress-management program to address personal and professional problems and provide support to police officers and their families concerning the effects of critical incident stress. The program specifically involves providing emotional support, identifying conflicts, making referrals, intervention, and debriefing.¹⁴⁷

The police–public relationships that have continued to evolve are important in the reduction of stress among police officers. If a good deal of the stress experienced by officers results from constant contact with the criminal elements in the community and from constantly working in an environment in which the police are regarded as causing trouble for other citizens, then increasing contacts with law-abiding citizens under positive circumstances should help alleviate some of the stress. To some extent, this gain may be offset by the additional problem-solving responsibilities placed on community-policing officers, but if the administration accepts risks and occasional failures as part of the growing process in community-oriented policing, then this stress can also be reduced.

“Progressive police departments actively implement innovative strategies (e.g., providing peer counselors, encouraging officers and couples to enter confidential counseling, making structural administrative changes, adding diversity programs, changing hiring and training practices, adding critical incident programs, etc.) to help minimize the risk of work stress among police.”¹⁴⁸



SAGE Journal Article:
Training Police Leadership
to Recognize and Address
Operational Stress

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Most organizations have cultures and subcultures that influence the behavior of employees. Culture involves deeply held beliefs that guide behaviors, among other things. Many subcultures are consistent with the organization's legitimate goals and serve as a positive influence on the operations of these organizations. However, subculture can involve detrimental elements. The police culture can involve extreme loyalty to other police officers, to a problematic degree, overidentification with the role, an intense desire to be accepted by the group, and adherence to a code of silence, which tends to erode the public's trust of the police. Indoctrination into the police culture begins at the academy and continues throughout the officer's career.

As society's concept of the police has changed, so too has police culture. The adoption of and experimentation with community-oriented policing may have altered the occupational and organizational environments of policing, and within these environments, the stresses experienced by police officers.¹⁴⁹ Greater attention to officers' efforts to reduce disorder, solve problems, and build rapport with the public could modify the us-versus-them outlook.¹⁵⁰

Additional influence of the police culture often involves feelings of isolation from the communities that the officers serve and a mistrust of supervisory ranks. The danger and authority of the work add to these dynamics. Stress and desensitization are other forces that affect police officers, the sources of which are both real and perceived. The isolating us-versus-them attitude can be both a cause and an effect of stress. Policing involves numerous stressors, both individual and organizational in nature.

How officers deal with these various stressors is extremely important. Officers who exhibit responses to stress associated with the negative aspects of the police subculture are much more likely than their counterparts to fall victim to burnout, cynicism, and even criminality. Many police officers cope with stress well by performing daily fitness routines and maintaining their commitment to the legitimate goals of the law enforcement profession.

8

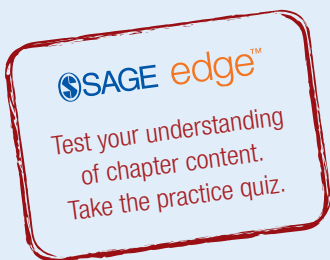
**UNDER
REVIEW**

To counteract the negative influences of the police subculture and the related forms of stress, police administrators and officers alike must be vigilant and recognize their responsibilities to identify and address problem behaviors before they become larger problems.



KEY TERMS

- Code of silence (blue wall) 177
- Police subculture 179
- Artifacts 181
- Organizational assumption 182
- Ethos 182
- Symbolic assailants 183
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) 185
- Police personality 187
- Hyperstress 188
- Hypostress 189
- Role conflict 189
- Role ambiguity 189
- Stress 192
- General adaptation syndrome 192
- Prejudice 192
- Cynicism 193
- Burnout 193
- Critical incident 199



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the police subculture, and in what ways does it conflict with the official mandates of police work?
2. What are the forms of organizational culture? Give an example of each form.
3. Why is it so difficult for police officers to avoid getting caught up in the subculture? Give specific examples.
4. Is policing a stressful occupation? Why and in what ways?
5. What are some of the major sources of police stress? How might some of these stresses be alleviated? Can they be eliminated?
6. What are the relationships among police stress, alcohol use, suicide, and family disruption?
7. How are police stress and the police subculture interrelated?
8. Discuss the ways in which community policing may help to reduce police stress. Can community policing also increase stress levels among officers? Explain.

INTERNET EXERCISES

1. Go to the Internet and search for information about *suicide by police*. Is this a recent phenomenon, and how often does it occur? How does involvement in a suicide by police affect the officer, the family, and the police department?
2. Most agree that police officers experience high levels of stress. Using your favorite search engine, go online and search for information on the effects of chronic stress and cardiovascular disease in police officers. How can police officers improve their cardiovascular health? Should police departments require all applicants to complete a cardiac stress test?

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