

**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

Burnout in Police Officers

**An Administrative Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Required for Graduation from the
Leadership Command College**

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March 2009**

ABSTRACT

Burnout is a term that has been around for decades. It is, however, most relevant to contemporary law enforcement because of the high profile, adrenaline-charged environment each law enforcement professional operates within. Burnout can shorten the career of the most loyal and energetic employees of an organization. Burnout can also cause feelings such as powerlessness, hopelessness, despair, and failure. Police officers are trained to remain neutral and detached during highly emotional situations, and this attitude can serve law enforcement professionals well on the job. However, it can become detrimental when taken home to the family, often resulting in domestic strife and divorce. Burnout impacts every aspect of a law enforcement officer both professionally and personally.

The purpose of this research is to define burnout, to identify the causative factors and nature of burnout, and to clarify the resulting dispositions. The author hypothesizes that the victims of burnout in law enforcement are highly ambitious, goal oriented individuals. Their nature is to work well under pressure, enjoying intense work loads, and to always contribute more than is expected of them. The results of these types of behavior can be career catastrophic. In addition, the author will attempt to determine whether prevention of burnout should be the responsibility of the employee, the employee's supervisors, the organization, or a combination thereof. Finally, the author will present suggestions for assistance in helping law enforcement officers overcome burnout.

The method of inquiry used by the author included periodicals and journals, as well as articles acquired from the internet. In addition, a survey was distributed to

spouses of law enforcement officers. Results from a seminar addressing causation of burnout conducted at the Texas Department of Public Safety Training Academy were also considered in this research.

After examination of the collected information, the author discovered that burnout is alive and well in the law enforcement community. This is evidenced, in part, by the turnover rate of employees, the high incidence of sick leave, and the continued rise in complaints due to officer misconduct. Burnout can most definitely have lasting negative effects on police officers, police supervisors, and police agencies. To counter these negative effects, positive influences such as setting new priorities, delineating quality family time, establishing a healthy diet and exercise regimen, and reducing unnecessary stress, should help to minimize or eliminate the damaging effects of burnout. Organizations should offer training in recognizing the symptoms of burnout for employees and supervisors, thus providing a vitally important proactive remedy. Although organizations play a vital role in employee well-being, the ultimate responsibility for recognizing and managing burnout resides within each individual officer.

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INTRODUCTION

It is important to recognize if burnout is the responsibility of the individual or the organization. Positive and negative dispositions or patterned responses and their application in both the work and personal environments often illustrate the position of the individual as having the most culpability in the big picture of burnout. In terms of burnout and the relevance to law enforcement, the individual in question is impacted both professionally and personally. Negative side effects of burnout can include health problems, loss of work, mental diversion, loss of focus and motivation, detachment, and, in the case of supervisors, an apathetic managerial impact on subordinates.

By defining burnout, identifying the causative factors and nature of burnout, clarifying the resulting dispositions, and then presenting suggestions for overcoming burnout, law enforcement officers and managerial staff can more easily work to prevent and/or treat existing burnout situations in their respective agencies. Simply stated, the research question to be examined simply focuses on whether or not burnout is the responsibility of the individual or the organization, and the intended method of inquiry includes: periodicals, journals, the internet, a blind survey of spouses of law enforcement officers, and a seminar addressing causation of burnout conducted at the Texas Department of Public Safety Training Academy.

Through research findings, this author intends to support that burnout is ultimately the responsibility of the individual; it is a “self-inflicted attitudinal injury” that most often occurs when demand exceeds resources (Scoville, 2006, p. 24). Although agencies have a responsibility to properly train supervisory personnel to effectively handle issues that often lead to burnout, individuals must maintain full liability for their

actions, both on and off the job. Many qualified and dedicated personnel are affected by burnout situations, usually without realizing such situations exist. By helping the law enforcement community realize the critical importance of identifying and addressing burnout at any level, the loss of personnel due to this situation could be greatly reduced or eliminated.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Perhaps the most accepted definition of burnout comes from Christina Maslach, best known as one of the pioneering researchers on job burnout and the author of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), who states that “burnout is a crisis in one’s relationship with work, which might vary from engagement to burnout” (Martinussen, Richardsen, & Burke, 2007, p. 239). While engagement is seen as an energetic state, full of confidence and ambition, burnout appears as a state of exhaustion, with the individual in question often cynical and hopeless. Jackson and Schuler (1983) labeled burnout as a psychological process, a series of attitudinal emotional reactions; however, Webster’s Dictionary defines the term as exhausted. According to Horton (1983), burnout is a problem that has been recognized since at least the Civil War, with “shell shock” during World War I and “battle fatigue” during World War II having a close association to the tension, boredom, confusion, and helplessness in a work environment, which is now known as burnout. Simply put, an individual with burnout is exhausted, mentally and physically.

Regardless of the exact specifics in definition, the fact that burnout has both psychological and physical manifestations that ultimately stem from an individual’s inability to control pressure in the workplace are obvious when identifying the causative

factors. General factors that could cause this in any work environment would include setting unrealistic goals, being expected to complete too many tasks, rules that seem coercive or punitive, boredom from unchanging or unchallenging tasks, and economic concerns. Causative issues specifically related to law enforcement would add in but would not be limited to exposure to death and disaster, routine work dealing with victims, the possibility of being exposed to violence and injury, and vicarious stressors, such as dealing with victims of sexual crimes (Martinussen, et al., 2007).

Depending on the geographic area, other factors range from perception of poor management or work conditions to staff shortages and inadequate resources. Ineffective communication also has negative ramifications in which individuals may so lack direction that they are incapable of communicating clear expectations to those who depend on their guidance and support, as well as to those in direct command (Horton, 1983). Jackson and Schuler (1983) indicated that characteristics on both sides, organizational and personal, may trigger burnout in the workplace. Conditions on the organizational side that may contribute to burnout include: a lack of rewards; excessive and outdated policies and procedures, work-paced jobs and close supervision; a lack of clear-cut expectations and job responsibilities; and the lack of support groups or cohesive work groups. Personal characteristics that usually interact with these organizational factors to cause burnout consist of idealistic expectations, idealistic job and career goals, and personal responsibility for low personal accomplishment. As to the idealistic expectations, it is expected that a law enforcement professional comes to the job wanting to save people and reform society; unfortunately, they later realize that the actual job is more about keeping people from violating the law (Daviss, 1983).

Idealistic job and career goals are also natural to people who are attracted to high-stress jobs, such as law enforcement, as these people are usually conscientious self-starters with high motivation, morals, and achievement objectives. The issue of responsibility, however, often correlates to the stress factor in the workplace, and according to Ed Donovan, a 24-year Boston patrol veteran and internationally recognized authority on police stress, “The more stress a society handles, the more stress a cop has to handle. Our society itself...has gotten so much worse...in just the last five years; and the more stress on the society, the more stress and responsibility on the police officer” (Daviss, 1983, p. 11).

The physical and mental manifestations of burnout will vary from person to person. The most obvious physical symptoms are fatigue, nausea, and muscle tension, which often veil other warning signs such as high blood pressure, heart disease, gastrointestinal ailments and alcoholism (Horton, 1983). By sheer observation, physical manifestations are more easily identified than those of emotional composition. Mental burdens are often far more tenuous and can include feelings of depression, irritability, hopelessness, isolation, frustration, detachment, cynicism, and apathy (Smith, Jaffe-Gill, Segal, & Segal, 2007). A police officer struggling with burnout can literally be at the apex of both physical and mental exhaustion, and the agency, as well as the officer, will suffer many severe consequences as a result of this career exhaustion. These include: development of withdrawal behaviors such as leaving work early, arriving late, and taking longer breaks, resulting in interpersonal friction, such as cynical and callous behavior toward others, small differences leading to monumental arguments, and friends looking like foes. An additional work-related behavior indicator is declining

performance, although while the quantity of the performance may not decrease, the quality may. However, in severe cases, the quantity will also show a significant decline. Personal consequences can include a suffering family life where emotionally exhausted officers go home tense, anxious, upset, and angry, as well as complaining about work-related problems and eventual health-related problems including insomnia, pharmaceutical dependency, and alcoholism (Jackson & Schuler, 1983).

Burnout is costing departments, across the country, immeasurable amounts of money and time and is robbing law enforcement organizations of their best officers. Furthermore, Dr. Martin Reiser, Chief Psychologist for the Los Angeles Police Department, stated: "Many of the people who develop psychological problems are highly trained, highly skilled people in which the department has invested thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of dollars. They have knowledge and experience that's irreplaceable" (Daviss, 1983, p. 11).

To clarify the dispositions or patterned responses that officers develop and utilize in day-to-day law enforcement, which enables them to respond quickly and without conscious thought, it is important to realize that said dispositions are more than habits; they include thoughts, emotions, and actions. Training, peer modeling, and repeated similar experiences serve to develop a disposition to a given circumstance (Southworth, 1990). The problem of transference within professional dispositional behavior is a definite emotional manifestation of burnout in a law enforcement officer, although most officers are unaware of the occurrence. A police officer is expected to be in control, no matter what the situation. However, this disposition of control and take charge can become inappropriate and destructive when acted out in family relationships. The same

can be said for the officer's dispositions of detachment in emotional situations and their need to question everything, which make spouses and children suspects in every family encounter and implies an underlying attitude of distrust (Southworth, 1990).

With all this in mind, it is important to examine what can be done to contend with burnout, individually and organizationally. On the personal front, Dr. Beverly Potter, who has worked with law enforcement officers, notes that "the most critical step to combating burnout is to realize that you are having a problem. In other words, know thyself" (Scoville, 2006, p. 26). Relevant factors in personal knowledge include understanding one's personality type, health issues, sleep concerns, diet matters, and regular exercise needs, both mental and physical. Other coping mechanisms that individuals should also consider, according to Scoville (2006), include: asking for help, celebrating little victories, appreciating the good things about the job, dropping unreasonable expectations, realizing everyone cannot be saved, managing time effectively, and idealizing the real instead of realizing the ideal. In relation to the positive dispositions which exist in the workplace, police officers need to deactivate these patterned responses at the end of the workday, thereby allowing the officer to become vulnerable, to show respect, to have concern, and to find trust in familial situations (Southworth, 1990).

Organizational considerations to prevent and/or challenge job burnout vary, depending on agency needs, but, hypothetically, could include: clearly defined responsibilities, realistic standards of performance, open communication, gradual introduction of major changes, reward system for accomplishments, and monitoring of managerial effectiveness (Horton, 1983). According to Martinussen et al., (2007), one

possible intervention would be to reduce work-family pressures by identifying and improving work conditions to make it easier for police officers to combine the two roles as parent/spouse and officer. Another possible intervention would be social support from both colleagues and supervisors, which may also have a positive effect and reduce the likelihood of developing burnout.

METHODOLOGY

Consideration must be made to determine if burnout is the responsibility of the individual or the organization, since this consideration is the basis of the research material being reviewed. In terms of burnout and the relevance to law enforcement, the individual is impacted both professionally and personally. The author hypothesizes that although the organization bears some culpability, the ultimate responsibility for controlling burnout rests with the individual law enforcement officer. The intended method of inquiry as to whether or not burnout is the responsibility of the individual or the organization included periodicals, journals, the internet, and a spousal survey of law enforcement officers. Results from a seminar addressing causation of burnout conducted at the Texas Department of Public Safety Training Academy were also considered in this research.

From the review of literature on law enforcement burnout, it seemed very obvious that most of the data collected came from surveys completed by law enforcement officers. To understand another perspective of the burnout issue, and perhaps get a more realistic viewpoint, a survey questionnaire with seven valid burnout personal consideration factors was sent to 20 spouses of law enforcement professionals in two large Texas metropolitan areas, Houston and Dallas, which addressed possible burnout

factors that could be transferred from work to home. The surveys were sent with the expectation of being returned blind (without identification); therefore, the integrity of the answer was not compromised. The response rate was 60%, with 12 responses being returned. The response sheets were color-coded as to geographic area, with seven being returned from the Houston area, and five completed from the Dallas area.

All information was analyzed by the author as to content relevant to the study. Of the answers returned, 84 total (12 x 7), only three responses were left unanswered or non-committal.

FINDINGS

When asked about whether an authoritarian police disposition carries over into home life, all 12 respondents answered in the affirmative, with ten citing significant issues of excessive control. Of these ten, specific attitudes referenced included a lack of patience with immediate family members, a feeling of consistent interrogation, and rigidity to change. Two of the respondents made a note to say that although they felt the police disposition came home with their spouse, they also felt that their spouse did not abuse the issue of excessive control at home.

As to the same police disposition being utilized toward the public as a whole (non-work related), all 12 again responded in the affirmative, although four noted that the problem was less exaggerated than at home. Four respondents stated that the issue was more pronounced to the public as a whole, two said it was about the same as at home, and two were noncommittal beyond their affirmative answer.

In helping to reduce the “pressure-cooker” atmosphere at home created by the pervasive police disposition, a variety of answers were received. Open and immediate

communication, involvement in activities by the entire family, and the practice of meditation were all noted as methods to favorably impact any negative disposition issues. Although said methods were diverse in nature, all responses indicated a significant, positive influence when applied in a consistent manner.

With regard to trust/intimacy issues affected by a law enforcement professional's job, such as emotional distance, only six respondents admitted to negative trust/intimacy problems. Specifics stated for these negative responses were knowledge of spousal infidelity and concerns for a spouse's lack of emotional commitment. It should be noted that six respondents did not submit an answer to this survey query.

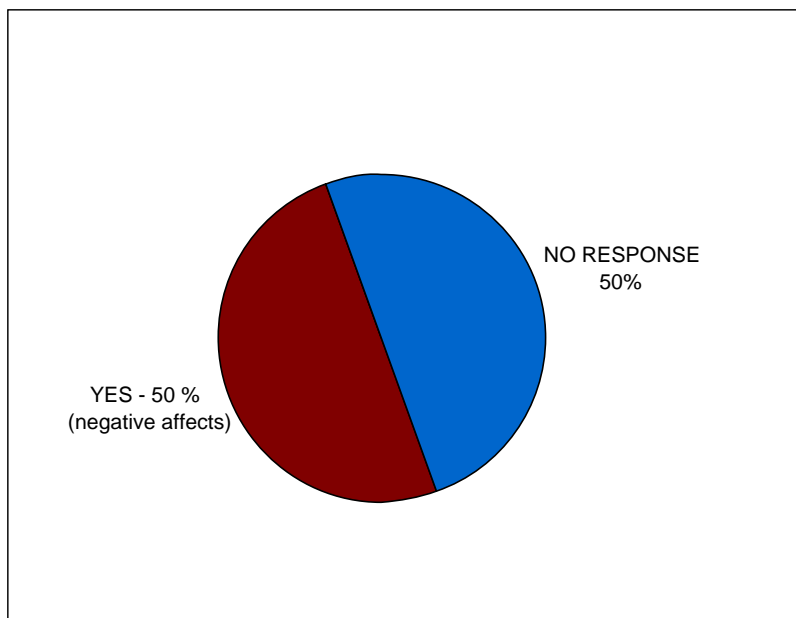


Figure 1. Number of respondents who answered whether their trust/intimacy was affected by their spouse's job.

As to the question of observing the same traits in other officers and their families, 11 of the 12 responded in the affirmative. Specific incidents of spousal infidelity and divorce as a result of negative disposition factors at home were noted by each affirmative response. One answer was negative with no additional comment.

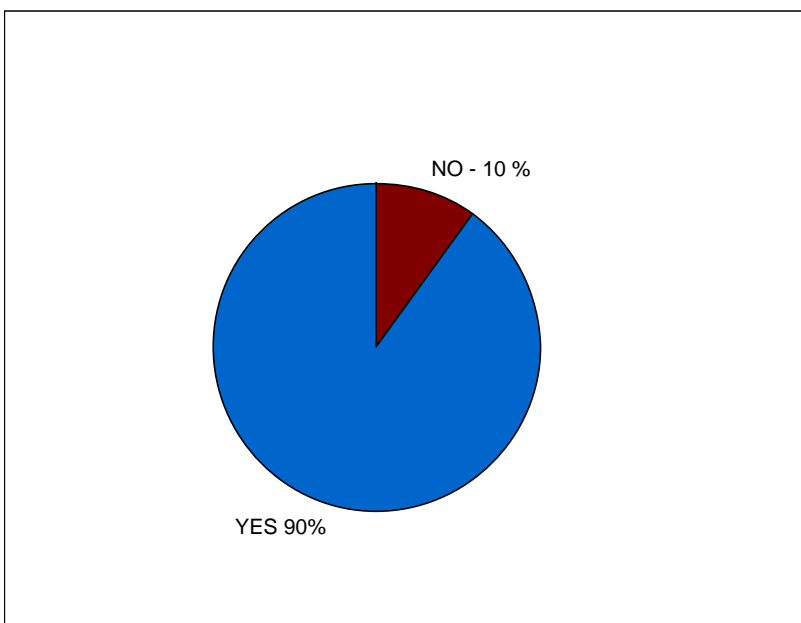


Figure 2. Number of respondents who answered affirmative to seeing the same traits in other officers with their families.

When asked if the same traits had been noticeable in other career paths, eight of the respondents replied in the affirmative, three were negative, and one was non-committal. Other professions noted to having similar dispositional issues were in the fields of medicine, education, and ministry. All 12 respondents gave affirmative answers regarding frequent communication and discussion as a method to help with job-related issues, with four specifically indicating receipt of professional therapy to assist communication issues.

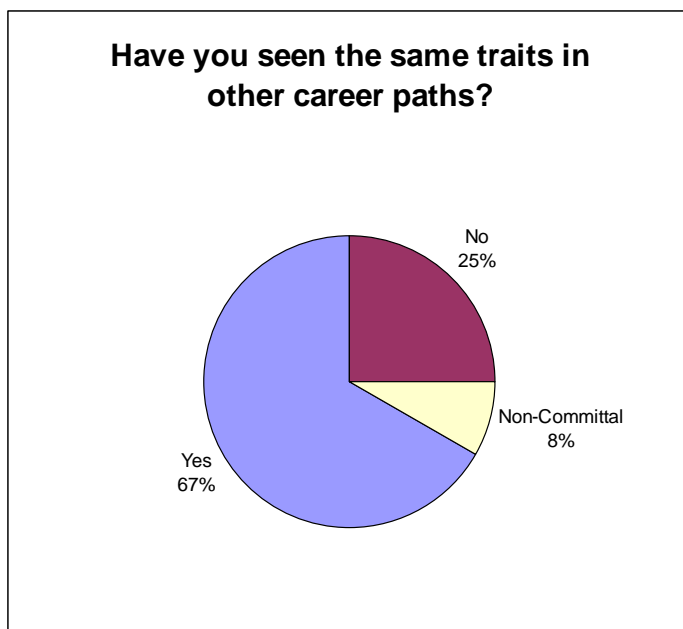


Figure 3. Number of respondents who answered affirmative to having seen the same traits in other career paths.

As a result of the study, it was obvious that burnout issues had a direct effect on domestic situations and that open communication was a key factor in diffusing negative disposition transference from the workplace to home. It was also very useful to note that the majority of the responses indicated observing the same issues with other officers' family situations, and all 12 responded in the affirmative for a dispositional attitude in public, although somewhat less pronounced, thereby giving more credence to the actuality of transference of police disposition/attitude from work to home.

In the early 1980's, a two-week seminar was hosted by the Texas Department of Public Safety in Austin, Texas. The course was instructed by Dr. John Matthews and Dr. Greg Riede, who are both former Professors of Criminal Justice at Sam Houston

State University, which is located in Huntsville, Texas. The focus of the seminar was why a law enforcement officer reaches burnout and leaves the job. Prerequisites for participation in the course were that the law enforcement officer had to have been assigned to street patrol duties and must have been on the job for 2 – 5 years, no more, no less. The theory behind this time frame on the job was that those who stuck it out after the first two years would probably still persist. Those who made it more than five years were most likely there to stay.

The intent of the seminar was to help participants determine if the chosen career path was actually what each one wanted or if it was turning into something less than expected. The identification of positive and negative aspects of the job was critical to the success of the seminar. Furthermore, what could be done to avoid certain negative aspects and achieve a successful and rewarding experience in law enforcement was also investigated.

Throughout the seminar there were group exercises, group discussions, role play, and collective summarization of discoveries. Each activity was designed to help the individual participants identify and describe positive and negative aspects of the job. Some participants were reluctant at first to be completely candid and open with themselves and the group. Others were immediately ready to get their descriptions of situations out in the open. It seemed as if they wanted to get rid of a burden and had finally found a group of brethren with which to share those feelings. Both professional situations and personal situations were discovered and discussed. Care was taken to make sure the exercises did not become pointless gripe sessions and direction was provided to assure all discussions drew a conclusion, whether positive or negative.

Summary information was presented concerning the prevention of burnout. The suggestions were all centered on what the individual law enforcement officer could do individually to prevent burnout. Suggestions for stress relief were presented and included topics such as maintaining healthy nutrition and an exercise program, aligning oneself with positive role models and a positive outlook on the job, and “don’t take the job home with you.” Socializing with civilian friends as well as co-workers and finding hobbies were also mentioned to relieve stress. Encouragement to consider a change in shift or assignment, thereby affording new challenges to keep the job fresh and rewarding, was the final solution offered as a viable option to burnout.

The experience of this seminar made a lasting impression on the author. It provided many suggestions the author has used personally throughout his career, and has been a good reference for the author to use with other law enforcement officers who experienced some level of career burnout.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

The problem or issue examined by the researcher considered whether or not burnout in law enforcement is the responsibility of the individual or the organization. By reviewing pertinent research material and through a blind survey, the author was able to get a better perspective of the culpability of the manifestations of burnout and possible remedies. Focusing on the responsibility issue, the research question was very specific as to where the final responsibility for burnout remains, either with the individual or organization. The author hypothesized that although an organization bears some culpability, the individual has the ultimate responsibility in the control of law enforcement-related burnout.

In conclusion of the review of literature and the findings from a law enforcement spousal survey, it is clear that burnout is a critical issue in current law enforcement. Equally important is the necessity to identify and remedy burnout issues, either before they emerge or in infancy, to avoid negative consequences, both in the workplace and at home. In the end, each individual officer must make it a personal decision to turn a potential conflict at work or home into a positive, thereby creating better circumstances. With this consideration, the individual, by personal choice, does have the ultimate responsibility in burnout control.

The hypothesis maintained by the author was supported by all research read and submitted. These findings gave credence to the necessity of individual decisions and ultimate responsibility of control. Caution, however, should be taken not to over generalize the findings of this survey. While the results of the individuals queried suggest corroboration with the author's hypothesis, future studies of this issue may find different results.

The study of burnout responsibility is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because of the exacting needs of the evolution of the new generation of law enforcement who, by continual monitoring for burnout considerations, will be able to maintain a positive, productive attitude, both in the workplace and at home.

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APPENDIX

The following is a blind survey sent to spouses of law enforcement professionals in two Texas metropolitan areas, Houston and Dallas:

1. Does the police disposition carry over into home life (authoritarian)?
2. Does the police disposition carry over toward the public as a whole (non-work related)?
3. What helps reduce the “pressure-cooker” atmosphere?
4. Is your trust/intimacy affected by your spouse’s job (emotional distance)?
5. Have you seen the same traits with other officers and their families?
6. Have you seen the same traits in other career paths?
7. Does frequent communication/discussion help with job-related negative issues?