

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

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**Correctional Officers and Stress**

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

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## **ABSTRACT**

The concept of correctional officers and how they handle stress is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because it can show how officer stress can be identified in its early stages, thus allowing police departments to reduce the level of stress on the officer, increase productivity, and cut costs that are often associated with this occupational issue.

The purpose of this research is to demonstrate how stress and burnout takes a toll on departments across the United States and its effect on the work place. This research will also examine links between stress levels and social support, job satisfaction and control issues and the effects of stress socially and physically. The research will show how stress and officer wellness is important to the job operation and expose how it can negatively affect other real life issues such as: marital, psychological and substance abuse problems. The method of inquiry used by the researcher included: a review of articles, periodicals, surveys, and journals.

The researcher discovered that reducing stress among both correctional officers and correctional supervisors will increase job satisfaction. Job satisfaction can be achieved by: revising schedules and improving training opportunities; improving communication with and responses from superiors; providing facilities and programs for physical fitness where personnel can relieve stress and have informal social contact with coworkers; providing opportunities to have input that influences policies and structures that affect job tasks and working conditions.

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## INTRODUCTION

The problem or issue to be examined considers whether or not correctional officers are under a daily amount of stress. In an attempt for officers to achieve their daily tasks over a period of time, stress can lead to what is often referred to as burnout. Stress has been defined as the body's reaction to any serious demand made upon it. Thus, stress can be produced by either positive or negative situations. The correction officer has to deal directly with offenders; some offenders are prone to violence against other inmates and sometimes against the officer, while daily needs of the inmate have to be met. Research has shown that correction officers are also exposed to verbal abuse, suicide attempts, and suicide by the offenders who actually succeed in carrying out this ultimate act. The demands of the administration on the correction officer to carry on his/her duties maintaining a professional bearing is challenging, often creating a sense of "they don't care about us attitude". This sometimes causes emotional, as well as psychological, damage attributing to a high rate of hypertension, heart attacks, and ulcers, which was higher when reported for a sample of police officers even though police had already been identified as one of the most stressed out occupational groups.

The purpose of this research is to discover the common denominator associated with this condition, report how to define and recognize the initial stages of worker burnout due to stress and examine ways others in this field have been able to assist their officers with this critical issue.

The research question to be examined focuses on whether or not there are ways to decrease this stress placed on officers due to sometimes very harsh environments

and the mental and physical demands from the officer's department and the public. The intended method of inquiry includes: a review of articles, periodicals and journals.

The intended outcome or anticipated findings of the research will be to see what causes this stress placed on the correction officer. How can the signs of stress be recognized in its earliest stages? How can stress be studied and its effects be examined using this research to assist correctional officers in carrying out their day to day duties.

The field of law enforcement will benefit from the research by possibly identifying the source of this problem and helping officers before stress takes its toll. Other factors that correctional officers have to consider are the fact that they are faced with an increased fear of contracting diseases such as AIDS, hepatitis B, and tuberculosis when assisting with critical incidents. Corrections officials in particular may feel anxious about the dramatic rise in the number of inmates with these diseases. Stress may be based on misinformation and this apprehension could be reduced with up-to-date information and education about these diseases and their transmission. It is imperative that training in universal precautions relating to contact with body fluids and proper searching technique be employed.

Furthermore, the correctional officer's family is under a certain amount of stress. The officer is frequently away at night, which creates the feeling that the officer is leaving his or her family unprotected. Also, the shift work and overtime required of the officer often disrupts family activities and can reduce the amount of time the family can spend together. Fears by the family that the officer will be killed or injured and the expectation that his or her children will be a certain way is often high amongst the

community. Children of officers are often teased because of their parent's jobs.

Additionally, officers are continually under great amounts of stress and the children can often accidentally internalize their parent's stress.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Finn and Tomz (1997), different officers are likely to perceive different events as stressful, depending on their individual background, personalities, expectations, law enforcement experience, years on the job, type of law enforcement work they perform, and access to coping resources. Nevertheless, sources of stress that seem to be common among, and in some cases unique or particularly burdensome to law enforcement officers, fall into four categories: (1) those related to the law enforcement organization, (2) those that relate to law enforcement work, (3) those that stem from the actions of the criminal justice system and the general public, and (4) those related to the individual officers personal life and approach to stressful events.

Whitehead (1986) writes, based on a review of the correctional officer literature, as structured by the theoretical perspective outlined in chapter 3, the model of the job burnout process was constructed for the correctional officers, age showed the strongest zero order correlations with the emotional exhaustion and depersonalization aspects of burnout. Lack of participation in decision making was slightly correlated with these two measures of burnout and unexpectedly weekly hours of inmate contact showed almost no relationship to exhaustion or depersonalization. Another unexpected finding was the correlation between age and hours of inmate contact; apparently, older workers had assignments with less inmate contact (p. 116).

Hours of inmate contact did correlate, however with lack of personal accomplishment surprisingly workers who reported more contact also reported more frequent feelings of personal accomplishment. For emotional exhaustion, the strongest

direct effects stemmed from stress, lack of job satisfaction, lack of support, and role conflict. For depersonalization, significant predictors were age, role conflict, lack of support, and stress. For lack of personal accomplishment, only weekly hours of inmate contact and lack of job satisfaction showed significant direct effects.

Stress is defined as the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it. Stress is not the same as anxiety. Anxiety relates primarily to an internal, personal problem, whereas stress has its roots as an external, environmental problem (Breznitz & Goldberger, 1993, p 5). In other words, stress can be decreased or increased according to the conditions that exist in the workplace, home, and world. Stressful conditions in the environment lead to a physiological response, which, left unchecked may lead to a period of exhaustion in which an individual is unable to cope. The researcher found that certain demographic characteristics are associated with higher levels of stress, including educational level, gender, and race. Higher levels of education are predictive of burnout and may lead to officer's becoming frustrated by too few opportunities for career advancement or by alienated from less educated workers. Other research found that female officers experienced high levels of stress than males. There is substantial reason to be interested in correctional employee stress as an area of inquiry. Occupational stress may lead to many negative outcomes. Research on correctional officers has found that stress is related to absenteeism (Lambert, 1999), burnout, and increased sick leave (Finn, 2000). The resulting sick days and compensation claims paid on the basis of organizational stress can be costly to an organization (Dollard et al., 1999). In addition, stress from work can lead to negative effects at home (Triplett, & Mullings, 1999), in what is known as spillover stress.



Additional research though not specific to correctional officers, has found occupational stress to be related to depression, illness, diminished productivity and alcohol use.

Some of the systems of prolonged exposure to chronic stress can be thought of as being made up of three components: physical, cognitive, emotional and behavioral.

The physical symptoms of stress often include: vision problems, and intensified fatigue, tremors, feeling uncoordinated, nausea, upset stomach, excessive sweating, chills, diarrhea, and rapid pulse. The cognitive symptoms of stress can include: disruption in logical thinking, blaming others, poor decision making ability, hyper vigilance, decreased awareness of surroundings, suspiciousness, a preoccupation with death, a low attention span, confusion, the loss of short term memory, reduced math skills, poor concentration, flashbacks, and bad dreams. The emotional symptoms of stress are often: anger, wanting to hide, feeling abandoned, anxiety, fear, denial, survivor's guilt, depression, hopelessness, feeling overwhelmed, lost, helpless, experiencing intensified or reduced emotional reactions, feeling disenchanted or alienated, feeling numb, and identifying with the victim. Several behavioral symptoms of stress are: becoming less or more communicative, withdrawal, change in normal activity, visits to the doctor for non-specific complaints, changes in interactions with others, excessive humor, increased or decreased appetite, unusual behavior, increased alcohol intake, increased smoking, antisocial acts, angry outbursts, and avoidance behavior (Chance, 2001).

## METHODOLOGY

The research question to be examined considers whether or not intervention at the early stage of officer stress and burnout can increase officer productivity and provide supervisors with the necessary tools to assess what extent of burnout the officer may be experiencing.

The researcher will show that: poor training, long hours away from home, including pay and benefits, paperwork, and poor communication are also factors that affect correction officers and increase officer burnout and stress. How on going training is necessary at all levels of the department on how to identify officer stress in the work place is paramount. Research will show stress, caused by conditions in the workplace, leads to negative effects for both employers and employees. A study of welfare workers found that occupational stress is likely to occur in work environments involving interactions with department or involuntary clients on a daily basis have examined the frequency and sources of stress among correctional officers. Studies suggest that stress is common among correctional officers and personnel. One study showed that as many as 39 % of correctional officers reported occupational stress.

The method of inquiry will include: a review of articles, periodicals, journals, and surveys. The instrument that will be used to measure the researcher's findings regarding the subject of Correctional Officers and Stress will include a survey and questionnaire, journals and periodicals. The size of the survey will consist of thirteen questions, distributed to 16 survey participants from different Texas Police departments and Sheriffs Offices. The response rate to the survey instrument resulted in police departments, sheriffs offices, school district police departments college campus police

departments, and from across the state of Texas. The information obtained from the survey will be analyzed by those associated with the Bill Blackwood Leadership Command College, and police agencies across the State of Texas and any other police departments doing research on the conditions of stress and burnout associated with correctional and police work.

## **FINDINGS**

My findings on Stress and Burnout recognition survey consisted of 16 different law enforcement agencies from across the state of Texas. The survey included a variety of questions concerning Stress and Burnout and its recognition. The size of the departments ranged from 15 sworn officers to as many as 165 Metropolitan police officers.

Agencies that participated were asked a series of questions concerning stress and burnout and its recognition at their respective departments. Of the 16 agencies surveyed not one had a system in place to identify burnout and stress. Of the sixteen only three had answers to the question that they were trying to at least do something to modify or give attention to this work condition. I will attempt to give the numbers of the agencies that participated in this survey.

When asked: Does your agency have a system in place to identify burnout and stress, 70 percent of the agencies surveyed answered with an affirmative no and 30 percent of the participants answered with a no answer, yet claiming an alternative way of dealing with stress and burnout. One answer given when asked if they have a system in place to identify burnout and stress was “No but we have a gym on site for employees to utilize”! Another answer was “There is no system; it is incumbent upon supervisor to monitor their personnel”! The final answer was “There is no formal system. We depend on our supervisors to observe and report signs of burnout or stress and then take corrective action”.

When asked does your agency provide training to supervisors in the recognition of burnout, 60 percent of the agencies responded no to the question while 40 percent did provide training to supervisors in the area of officer stress and burnout.

Next the agencies were asked: Does their agency have an employee assistance program (access to free counseling for the officer and family), of the agencies survey 80 percent stated that they did have programs in place and 20 percent stated that they did not. Note that the agencies that did not have a program in place had only fifteen officers in their departments.

When asked if their agencies trained officers and supervisors how to recognize and deal with burnout, the agencies surveyed 70 percent of the agencies reported that they did not have a program in place while again 30 percent reported that they did have a program in place that trained supervisors and officers on how to recognize and deal with stress. Of those that did have a program in place for this one stated that there was minimal training done in the recruit in service class, which is good but did they have a follow up on their training. Another stated that only supervisors received this training through various supervisory related schools. Another agency stated that they received training as part of a mandatory CIT (Crisis Intervention Team).

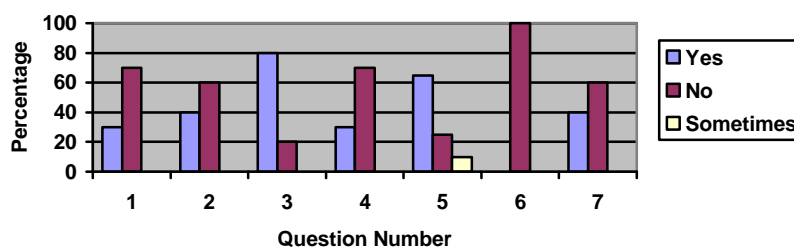
When asked if their agency conducted critical incident debriefing the researcher expected to hear that 100 percent of the agencies would respond with a affirmative answer, but to my surprise only 65 percent of the agencies conducted critical incident debriefings, While ten percent answered "Sometimes depending on the incident" while 25 percent answered no.

When agencies were asked if their departments SOP or General Orders address burnout, 100 percent of the agencies the researcher surveyed answered no.

When asked if their departments made job reassignments based on burnout/stress 60 percent of the agencies surveyed said no, while 40 percent answered yes. Some of the yes survey answers given had different reason why they allowed reassignments due to officer burnout/stress. One agency answer surveyed stated that: “Unfortunately this is done to some extent”, typically with more veteran officers“, another agency surveyed said officer reassignments were allowed if necessary and asked by the employee who said they were burned out. Yet another stated no they didn’t have reassignment due to burnout/ stress but that the chief believed in career rotation for career development. Max of three years for Command Staff, no limit on officers, but with their department being young reassignments frequently occurred. The agencies came from many different geographic locations and types of agencies across the state of Texas.

The researcher found that the average age the officers were when hired was between twenty one and twenty three years of age. When the researcher queried about the age the officers though a new hire should be when hired by their agencies the officers surveyed though they should be at least twenty five years of age.

**Graph 1**



**QUESTIONS 1-7**

## **DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS**

The DISCUSSIONS/CONCLUSIONS section must include the following nine sentences:

The problem or issue examined by the researcher considered whether or not Law Enforcement Agencies have support systems in place to recognize burnout and stress corrections. How line officers feel both environmental and organizational stressors, whereas supervisors are primarily preoccupied with organizational factors. How some line officers feel that it's not the inmate that brings on these stressors but the other officers were the source of their stress. Dealing with supervisors and officers can be stressful because they have agendas and attitudes.

The purpose of this research was to show how stress and burnout takes a toll on departments across the country, its effect on the work place and examine links between stress levels and social support, job satisfaction and control issues, its effects both socially and physically. This research has shown the health issues associated with stress as well as family problems. How discovering the early signs of stress and burnout can decrease cost and improve work performance.

The research question that was examined focused on health issues, proper training from the supervisors' level to the line officer, management and training programs that work on being pro-active rather than reactive.

The researcher hypothesized that law enforcement was not doing enough to help in the matter of stress and burnout. Of all departments surveyed, very few provided any training in the recognition of this work place condition called burnout. Assistance programs initiated through the agencies medical insurance, or even have a standard operation to assist the officer in time of duress.

The researcher concluded from the findings that poor supervision, and the actions and attitudes of correction supervisors can either increase or help alleviate the stress of the job. How recognition for a job well done is rare. Shift work, unproductive management styles, and perceived favoritism by administrators regarding assignments and promotions, lack of input in policy and decision making, inadequate staff. Of the agencies surveyed who conducted critical incident debriefing, a shocking 65 percent of the agencies answered yes, while 25 percent answered no to this question and a disturbing 10 percent of the agencies had debriefings sometimes or not at all.

The findings of the research did support the hypothesis. The reason(s) why the findings did support the hypothesis are things such as role conflict, age and job satisfaction , in decreasing order of importance, all have significant direct effects on depersonalization, and the effects were as predicted; those officers who reported more frequent feelings of depersonalization. Participation in decision making was another factor that increase officer stress because having no say in the decision making process made them feel not important. Finally, all three aspects of burnout emotional



exhaustion, depersonalization, and the personal accomplishment factor were included as three distinct outcomes because this conceptualization follows the claim of Maslach and Jackson (1981) that these phenomena are distinct aspects of burnout.

Limitations that might have hindered this study would have to center on the amount of time and information that was put into the surveys the information collected and research.

The study of Correctional Officers and Stress is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because it can help law enforcement agencies reduce sick time, both physical and psychological problems, maintain healthier officers who can endure the difficult job of being in corrections.

The study of Correctional Officers and Stress is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because it will allow the law enforcement community to better understand the and prepare the officer better for the difficult job they have. With training and early intervention, identifying burnout and stress at the onset, will be very beneficial to the agencies and the officer. Who stands to be benefited by the results of this research is, the law enforcement agencies, the officer and his family, the tax payer. We must do more to recognize this condition that affects law enforcement agencies across this nation and this starts with training and early intervention.

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**STRESS/BURNOUT RECOGNITION SURVEY**

Agency: \_\_\_\_\_

Name/Rank \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Number Sworn Personnel \_\_\_\_\_

- (1) Does your agency have a system in place to identify burnout/stress? If so, what is it?
- (2) Does your agency provide training to supervisors in the recognition of burnout/stress? If so what type of training?
- (3) Does your agency have an employee assistance program (access to free counseling for the officer and family)?
- (4) Does your agency train officers and supervisors how to recognize and deal with burnout? If so what type of training? How often?
- (5) Does your agency conduct critical incident debriefing?
- (6) Does your SOP or General Orders address burnout? If so How?
- (7) Does your department make job reassignments based on burnout/stress.
- (8) What geographic location is your department located?
- (9) At what age did you begin with your current department?
- (10) How long have you been employed at your current department?
- (11) At what age do new officers typically begin working at your department?
- (12) How many years of experience do your newer officers typically have?
- (13) What age do you feel is best for new officers to begin working at your department?

