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Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

Dispatchers vs. Police: The Stress Factor

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ABSTRACT

This research project was performed to compare the amount of stress of the commissioned officer and the commissioned dispatcher. There were many stressors and stress consequences found within the two groups. One area of concern was the amount of stress management programs and training which are established for police officers versus dispatchers. There are ample training resources, but the dispatchers are sometimes forgotten; therefore, they are not availed the same opportunities as the commissioned officer.

The methods used in this research were: surveys, personal discussions with both groups and a week-long participation by the researcher in a communications center. These results were also compared to findings in a similar project by Clark (1997).

The results of this study support the hypothesis that dispatcher stress is just as prevalent as that of the police officer. Therefore, more effort should be made in training and support of the communications staff so the cohesiveness between the two groups is attained.

INTRODUCTION

In today's law enforcement setting there are many stressors contributing to everyday duties. Dispatchers and police officers deal with a wide array of stress daily. Many would argue that police officers deal with a much larger and intense amount of stress than dispatchers.

"Dispatchers perform a complex and stressful function. Unfortunately, the critical role they play is often misunderstood by administrators, officers, and citizens" (Burke, 1995:p.1).

Dispatching in today's communication centers requires a certain level of intelligence in order to perform the everyday functions of a telecommunicator. As the demands on a person's mind and ability increases, so does the stress level. Police dispatchers are the hub of departmental activity. Dispatchers communicate information to patrol officers and answer calls for service including, "911" transmissions. There is a very striking similarity between the functions of police dispatchers and the task performed by air traffic controllers (Sewell and Crew, 1984).

On the other hand, police officers are constantly in an ever-changing atmosphere; one that leads to many unknown occurrences throughout a given shift. It seems logical that police officers should experience high levels of stress, but this is simply not true as found in a study at Sam Houston State University (Clark, 1997; Malloy and Mays, 1984). Many police officers disclose that organizational experiences are more stressful than operational ones (Clark, 1997; Hart et al.,1995; Lawrence, 1984; Malloy and Mays, 1984; Sigler and Wilson, 1988). There is little sound evidence demonstrating police work is any more stressful than most other occupations (Anson and Bloom, 1988; Hart et al; 1995; Malloy et al., 1984). This project will examine whether dispatchers and patrol officers suffer from similar or different types of stress. This will be conducted through a survey of dispatchers and a separate survey for police officers.

In addition, the researcher will reveal information gathered after spending one week working in a police communications center as a dispatcher. It is hypothesized that dispatcher and patrol officer stressors are relatively similar. The survey will encompass different types of agencies such as, officers and dispatchers from University, Sheriff and Municipal law enforcement agencies.

Police dispatchers are subjected to very similar organizational and operational environments as police officers, but little attention is given to this vital component of law enforcement concerning stress (Burke, 1996). This research project should shed light for administrators on the types of stress experienced by their officers and dispatchers and identify training and management programs to deal with stress. If the research reveals dispatcher and line officer stress is found to be comparable, more effort should be spent addressing dispatcher stress, as it is just as prevalent as police officer stress.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There has been extensive research conducted on stress and what causes stress in individuals. One area that has not been addressed to a large extent is commissioned police dispatcher and police officer stress. In times like today stress can be categorized in many different ways. It comes out in individuals at work and at home. The work environment has always been a stressful situation for many people and especially when high-risk or just dealing with risky situations is involved.

Taking a look at dealing with emergencies for a moment. An emergency situation such as a violent assault occurs and a victim calls the local police department. The first person he or she talks to is usually the police dispatcher. This dispatcher takes pertinent information to assess the call and dispatch the nearest officer to respond to the victim. This dispatcher might even keep the individual on the phone to wait for the arrival of that officer. In the meantime, the officer has received the call for service and is in route.

During this time, the officer is going through a wide variety of thoughts. Upon the officer's arrival and knowing the victim is in the safe hands of the officer, the dispatcher terminates the call and leaves it up to the officer to proceed with the call. The dispatcher is left empty and sometimes unknowing to the results of the call. She may go on for days on end and not know the outcome to the "officer's call". Whoa, the "officer's call". This is usually how it seems when really the officer probably dealt with it and went on to many other calls since then, and the dispatcher knows nothing at all about the resolution and may never know unless she comes in contact with the officer personally. The "officer's call" is really the "dispatcher's call". The dispatcher was the first person to deal with the situation. Did she not get to know something about the caller even if it was for a brief moment? The dispatcher is the one who was left for

days not knowing the outcome? Yes, the officer puts his or her life on the line out in the field but the dispatcher gets some of the credit as well. Especially when it comes to measuring stress levels between the two positions.

This type of situation, along with many others, goes on daily in the police department. How about dispatchers on T.V.? According to Francis Holt, "Nobody ever swears to these 911 operators on T.V., where do they work?" or "When are they going to show us doing four clerical jobs, while answering the phone, trying to eat at the desk, train the new guy and take abuse from an officer at the same time?" (Holt, 1998: p. 1) If life for dispatchers were as easy as it is depicted it would be tremendously better. However, looking at reality it is much more stressful and different.

On the other hand, the officer working out in the field gets to answer the call in many unknowing situations which leads to a great deal of stress. Given the same situation as before, the officer answers the call knowing in the back of his or her mind this could be the last call he or she ever answers due to an unknown emergency occurring, such as getting shot or attacked by the victims assailant. A person must agree there are many stressful elements to both sides. "For this reason, at least, law enforcement officers need to recognize their radio and their dispatcher is a vital link to their survival, and thus a special relationship must develop between officer and dispatcher" (Eller, 1998: p. 1).

Most police officers have always seen themselves as superior to the police dispatcher. This carries over to the way they treat dispatchers, which in turn causes stress between the two groups. There are many stressors, which are caused by the daily activities performed by both groups. It makes sense they both should be exposed to stress management courses, to learn to deal with their jobs more effectively.

What is the stress referred to in this paper? It is the relationship between the officer and the dispatcher. It has been found that dispatchers and officers are like couples who fight with one another because each presents a target of convenience for the other, or because neither knows what the other went through that day (Holt, 1999) . Of course, the stress between the two individuals turns into other stressors but it begins with their relationship. Each position has its own stress consequences and issues as previously mentioned, but overall they both need to be addressed through stress management programming.

One interesting aspect of the research was each study or review depicted how dispatchers were in fact stressed and usually at a higher rate than the commissioned peace officer. As one researcher presents, “ police dispatchers are the forgotten victims of stress” (Clark, 1997: p. 39). One area which was also researched was the dispatcher and police officer not being familiar with each others roles which in turn makes it hard for both roles to work together, “familiarity breeds respect, and a healthy working relationship is born”, (Eller, J.M. 1998: p. 2). Both of these elements help develop dispatchers and police officers roles. Helping to deal with this one area also alleviates a tremendous amount of stress, especially when it comes to the police dispatcher.

Police dispatchers often have to deal with the moment, and then a few days later the wonderment of what occurred. The police officer deals with the here and now and then moves on to many other occurrences. As Doerner (1987) depicted, police dispatchers deal with things so much differently than their counterparts and many times it is misunderstood. Police dispatcher stress has often been compared to that of an air traffic controller. Of course, everyone understands the importance of the air traffic controller, but somehow the police dispatcher role has been kept hidden. No one really knows what goes on behind those locked doors marked “authorized only entry”. No one really knows except the police dispatcher.

METHODOLOGY

Survey research was conducted over a 4-month period and involved law enforcement agencies in the State of Texas representing both municipal and university police agencies of varying size. Ten law enforcement agencies participated ranging in sizes of 1 –500 commissioned police officers and 1 –35 commissioned dispatchers. The sample consisted of individuals of varying assigned details and shifts, but all relate with each other on a daily basis.

Surveys were given to the participating agencies with instructions through their respective police supervisors. The surveys were distributed to obtain a broad range of personnel so the correlation of stress between patrol personnel and dispatchers would be determined through a wider generalization. There were 75 surveys issued and 50 returned. 27 surveys were collected from dispatchers and 23 were police officers. The survey consisted of ten questions and was correlated to the survey results compiled by a similar study done by Clark in 1997.

Questions asked mainly leaned towards if the individual did feel stress, what type of stress, and the consequences he or she felt. A question was directed towards feeling stress as intensely as their counterparts in the department. This was followed by why the individual felt the stress more intensely. Another group of questions looked at how well the surveyor dealt with stress and if further training would help him or her deal with his or her particular stress management (see Appendix 1&2). Demographics, shift assignment and number of commissioned officers and dispatchers were also listed. Overall, the job stress was contributed by factors listed during the final question which gave the researcher a cumulative look at all aspects of the necessities for a stress management program. All the questions asked in the survey were directed towards finding out who was feeling the most stress, the dispatcher or the officer. The questions also help see the correlation between what stressors they were having and

why. This in turn helped to draw the conclusion towards the need for stress management programming and which group was really feeling the stress (see Appendix 1 & 2).

A week- long observation was also conducted by the researcher and played a large role in the research. "Good moderating is not about performing for clients; it's about truly wanting to learn what the world looks like from the respondents' view". (Riva, 1998: p. 1) Therefore, one full week was spent inside a police communications center performing as a dispatcher. The research was done between the hours of 7:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. This gave the researcher a span which covered meeting with all the dispatchers in the department. The researcher worked 8 hour shifts for 3 days in order to encompass the role as a dispatcher. The other 2 days were spent observing and conversing with the dispatchers from all three shifts and seeing their stresses first hand. Being at the location and seeing and feeling the frustrations of the job were invaluable attributes to the study. Participant observation definitely played a vital role in learning about the dispatchers view point. After interviewing the dispatchers and then talking to the officers in the field the survey questions were beginning to take shape and really explore the reasons behind these two groups stresses.

All the information in the surveys were reviewed and related to the ones listed above. The week-long participation as a dispatcher was also reviewed and added into the analysis. The main topic is again reiterated that stress is very much an issue with police dispatchers just as much as the commissioned police personnel. All police departments should apply to stress management courses for the dispatchers as they do for commissioned police officers.

FINDINGS

The results of this study supported previous findings that commissioned police officers displayed less than and no greater stress levels than those of the police dispatcher. The main areas to be compared were the stressors the officer experienced. These were identified as personnel issues, meeting deadlines, paperwork demands, customer service, too many responsibilities, and heavy workload. Whereas, dispatchers identified their stress concerns as dealing with manpower shortages, equipment/radio issues, poor officer relations, too many open-ended calls, and frequent feelings of helplessness.

These stresses were manifested through physical symptoms of insomnia, headaches, stomach problems and muscle tension. Dispatchers were at the forefront with hypertension and muscle tension, whereas officers were slightly below. Being each had similar stress consequences would constitute similar stress on both parties' part as depicted in Figure 1&2.

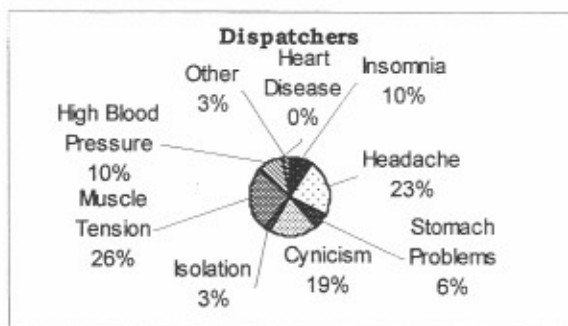


Figure 1

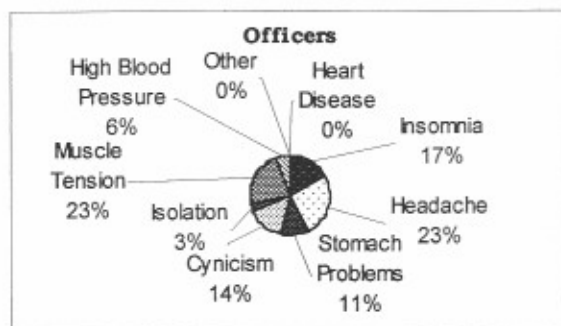


Figure 2

After discussing these issues at great length while participating as a dispatcher for a week, the analysis became very clear. Dispatchers do feel alienated and when the officers in the field do nothing to change these feelings the dispatchers very often feel left out; especially when it comes to stress management training. The dispatchers and officers were all dealing and performing with everyday functions as they always do. Questions were answered because the

dispatchers wanted to let readers know how they really felt, the officers on the other hand seemed to be playing the stressed out role. Officers felt they were the ones which were hit on hardest when it came to dealing with or having stress in their positions. Of course, the dispatchers felt differently and knew they were the ones with the biggest stress issues. According to the researcher both sides had legitimate arguments, but when it came down to it the dispatcher was the alienated one and lacked the support of the officers and sometimes others within the department.

Findings revealed every participant had had some form of stress management training. The main consensus is they both need more. Dispatchers were not as highly trained in this area as the police officers. Two-thirds of the officers felt they had as intense of stress in their departments as the dispatchers (see Figure 3). The dispatchers on the other hand felt theirs were greater. Most officers felt they dealt with stress in a healthy manner where the dispatchers felt they did not.

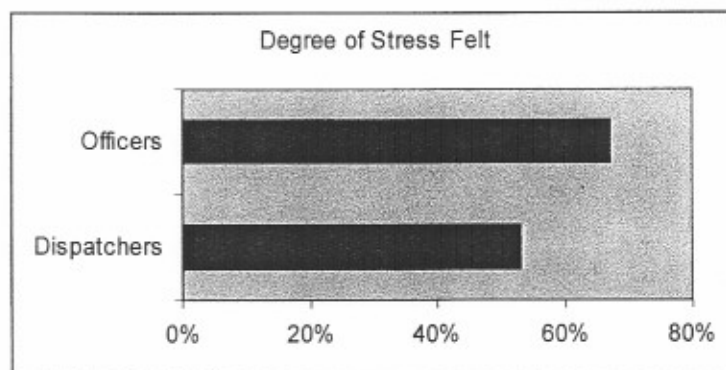


Figure 3

Shift differential assignments did not make a difference. Late night personnel did feel some stress from the nighttime work environment, but overall stress was not unique to time of day. The amount of personnel within their division did play a role especially with dispatchers. Overtime was abundant in departments with low dispatcher employment. "There was a

significant difference between anxiety scores of the police officers, and dispatchers with the dispatchers showing reliably higher anxiety levels than the officers.” (Clark, 1997: p. 10)

Overall dispatcher stress proved to be just as pertinent as police officer stress and was reflected in the surveys administered and researcher observations.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

The findings of this study support the survey findings that dispatchers do suffer from as much of, if not greater stress than commissioned officers. There was no significance in shift schedules to the amount of stress sustained. Male and female traits were not considered. "This study seems to confirm previous findings that law enforcement is no more inherently stressful than most other adult occupations, in fact, may be less stressful than some." (Clark, 1997: p. 2)

The findings in this study also conclude that dispatchers need the same amount of stress management as the commissioned officer does. Dispatchers are sometimes referred to as the forgotten breed. This survey depicts the stress the dispatchers and commissioned police officers feel in their daily duties and which stressors make them intensify.

One main area of concern is having the dispatcher and officer understand each other's role allowing many problems to be defused before having the chance to begin. According to Eller, "cross-familiarization is the key" (Eller, 1998). Having dispatchers ride with officers and having commissioned police officers spend half a shift in the communications center would allow both to see what is going on behind the scenes and allow them to understand each others role.

The findings in this research paper did support the hypothesis. The findings also depict that dispatchers will be affected by stress management implementation in their training programs. This will in turn help commissioned officers and dispatchers relationships. This will also help alleviate stressors within the departments and help prove that dispatcher stress is important and should be taken very seriously. Commissioned officers lives are often in the hands of the dispatchers. It should be a major concern to make sure these two groups are cohesive and work together in a more stress free environment.

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Appendix 1

Dispatcher Stress Survey

CIRCLE YES of NO where applicable:

1. Do you feel stress in your job? YES NO

2. If yes, what are the stressors you feel?

CHECK ALL THAT APPLY

3. What are the consequences of the stress you feel?

- Insomnia
- Headaches
- Stomach Problems
- Cynicism
- Isolation
- Muscle Tension
- High Blood Pressure
- Heart Disease
- Other

4. Do you feel your stress is as intense as the officers in your department? YES NO
Why?

5. Have you had training in stress management? YES NO

6. Do you feel you deal with stress in a healthy manner? YES NO

7. If no, would you want further training in stress management? YES NO

8. How many commissioned officers are in your department? _____

9. How many dispatchers are in your department? _____

10. Which shift do you work? _____

11. Estimate the number of calls for service during your shift _____.
How many are emergency type calls _____.
How many are non-emergency calls _____.

12. Overall, what do you believe contributes to stress in your job/position?

Appendix 2

Officer Stress Survey

CIRCLE YES of NO where applicable:

1. Do you feel stress in your job? YES NO

2. If yes, what are the stressors you feel?

CHECK ALL THAT APPLY

3. What are the consequences of the stress you feel?

- Insomnia
- Headaches
- Stomach Problems
- Cynicism
- Isolation
- Muscle Tension
- High Blood Pressure
- Heart Disease
- Other

4. Do you feel your stress is as intense as the dispatchers in your department? YES NO
If yes, Why?

5. Have you had training in stress management? YES NO

6. Do you feel you deal with stress in a healthy manner? YES NO

7. If no, would you want further training in stress management? YES NO

8. How many commissioned officers are in your department? _____

9. How many dispatchers are in your department? _____

10. Which shift do you work? _____

11. Estimate the number of calls for service during your shift _____.
How many of those are emergency calls _____.
Non-emergency calls _____.

12. Overall, what do you believe contributes to stress in your job/position?