

**WORKPLACE STRESS & TRAUMA IN POLICING:
SOURCES, OUTCOMES & IMPLICATIONS**

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It is widely accepted that law enforcement is one of the most stressful occupations in the world¹. The reasons for this lie in the special nature and context of the profession. A comprehensive approach to the occupational stresses encountered in law enforcement is provided by the Complex Stress Model² developed by the author – incorporating both systemic and traumatic workplace stresses, as well as the psychosocial challenges specific to the work. The following briefly reviews components of these stresses, their outcomes and effects, and the organizational challenges these pose to policing jurisdictions in Canada.

Traumatic Workplace Stresses

Law enforcement professionals are at risk for routine and cumulative exposure^{3,4,5} to direct traumatic incidents involving threats to personal safety^{6,7,8,9}. Police officers face a significant risk for death and homicide¹⁰ (in Canada, 117 officers were murdered on duty between 1961-2001¹¹). The number of assaults against officers is high and continues to escalate¹², with some Canadian jurisdictions reporting close to 50% of their patrol officers having been physically assaulted while on duty over the last year¹³. Other common risks include: high-speed accidents and car chases; attending at critical incidents; and exposure to air-borne, or blood-borne diseases such as tuberculosis, hepatitis B, hepatitis C or HIV^{14,15,16,17}. Police are also subject to a range of other work-related injuries such as physical injuries sustained during pursuits of suspects¹⁸; exposure to toxic, flammable, or explosive chemicals or vapours^{19,20} (e.g., in arson cases, illicit drug laboratories, etc.); being taken hostage²¹.

Police are also at chronic risk for secondary, or vicarious trauma^{22,23}. Also known as compassion fatigue²⁴, this refers to the acute and cumulative distress normal people experience when witnessing or hearing about dreadful things that have happened to others. Sources of secondary trauma include attending accident scenes, witnessing injury, dealing with traumatized witnesses, continuous exposure to human misery, assault or death of fellow officers, and investigations of assault, abuse and homicide, etc.^{25,26,27,28,29}. It is important to recognize that civilian personnel working in the law enforcement field (i.e., dispatchers, administrative and support staff, and other professionals such as victim support workers and counselors) are also exposed to many of these traumatic stressors, and are typically most at risk for secondary traumatic stress.

Systemic Workplace Stresses

Many organizational challenges contribute to increased stress in policing³⁰. Common systemic stressors include: overtime, excessive workload, travel demands, rotating shift-work, resource scarcity, perceived lack of control, role ambiguity and role conflict, departmental politics, harassment, and severe work-life conflict^{31,32,33,34,35,36,37,38}. In addition, many police forces have encountered additional pressures arising from restructuring, chronic understaffing, increased reliance on sophisticated technologies, demographic changes in both staff and community, increased needs for specialized skills and expertise, increased media scrutiny, and other contextual challenges^{39,40}. Clearly, many of these stress factors apply to both law enforcement members and civilian support staff.

Specific Psychosocial Challenges

Apart from the specific traumatic and systemic stresses, law enforcement professionals also face a set of pervasive stresses unique to policing. Specifically, by any objective measure, the conditions of work, and the population being dealt with, are highly stressful in their own right⁴¹. Exposure to the realities of violence, abuse, trauma, poverty, system failures, etc., challenges individual's previous belief systems about self and world. It is also the case that the wider

population does not share much of the knowledge associated with law enforcement work – their professional experience with offenders and victims is shared only with colleagues. Additionally, uniformed members present a highly visible public profile – and individuals in the community often project strong feelings onto the uniform rather than responding to the person wearing it. Finally, work in policing is not always valued by society and personnel often experience social stigma and negative judgments. At a psychological level, these five challenges represent: stress, identity challenge, isolation, alienation, and stigmatization. Collectively, these form highly potent psychological challenges^{42,43}.

Effects And Consequences Of Workplace Stress & Trauma In Law Enforcement

This complex constellation of risk factors places law enforcement personnel at greatly increased risk for a wide range of negative physiological, mental health, behavioral and interpersonal symptoms and effects⁴⁴. In addition to direct risk for occupational injury, law enforcement professionals suffer the physiological consequences of long term exposure to acute and chronic stresses – these include increased risk for cardiovascular disease, weakened immune system, frequent infectious illness, neuroendocrine problems, musculoskeletal difficulties, a wide range of somatic complaints, fatigue, physical depletion and exhaustion^{45,46,47,48,49,50,51,52,53,54,55}. In terms of adverse mental health outcomes, law enforcement personnel and others subjected to similar stress profiles experience increased rates of clinical depression, suicide, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse and addictions, and diminished self-esteem^{56,57,58,59,60, 61, 62, 63, 64}. Behavioral and interpersonal effects include social isolation and withdrawal, relationship problems and increased rates of family dysfunction and breakdown^{65,66,67,68,69,70}. It is also important to note that negative stress effects are more pronounced in older police officers⁷¹ - a critical issue when considering an aging workforce.

At the organizational level, these effects translate to increased rates of absenteeism, sick leaves, long-term disability, early retirement or attrition, labor-management friction, and difficulties attracting and retaining personnel^{72,73,74,75,76}. The consequences to the work environment have also been demonstrated to include diminished morale, poor job satisfaction, poor work performance, increased discourtesy complaints, public relations problems, and other negative outcomes^{77, 78, 79, 80, 81}.

In summary, law enforcement personnel function within an environment characterized by high levels of acute and chronic complex stresses – with serving members frequently carrying out their duties while struggling with a myriad of stress related symptoms and effects.

Workplace Risk and Resilience Factors

Given the high risk for negative occupational stress outcomes in law enforcement, it is important to briefly consider the substantial body of research that has determined an array of workplace factors which act to either enhance resilience or increase risk for negative outcomes under circumstances of high occupation systemic and traumatic stress⁸². In terms of systemic workplace stress, critical risk/resilience factors include: social support^{83,84,85,86}, role demands⁸⁷ and clarity^{88,89}, recognition from others of the value of the work^{90,91,92}, personal belief that the work is valuable^{93,94}, the fit between personal and organizational values⁹⁵, workplace harassment or discrimination^{96,97,98,99}, work-family conflict^{100,101,102}, workload¹⁰³, and adequate material resources¹⁰⁴. Risk/resilience factors associated with traumatic workplace stress include: the frequency, intensity and duration of exposure to traumatic incidents and material^{105,106,107,108}, levels of training and preparation^{109,110}, quality of supervision and access to expert consultation^{111,112,113}, the social and cultural context^{114,115}, the individual's cognitive appraisal of the situation^{116,117,118,119,120}, and access to short- and long-term support resources¹²¹. While many

individual factors are also important predictors, these particular risk/resilience moderators are substantially determined by workplace policies, procedures, culture and attitudes.

Contemporary Challenges in Policing

Quite apart from all the other structural and resource issues confronting policing, the issue of succession planning presents critical concerns. Driven by demographics, much of the western industrialized world will experience a massive shift in personnel as the population bulge of baby-boomers retire and need to be replaced. The boomers have occupied a disproportionate segment of the workforce and their retirement will open up a very large hole. This problem is only compounded by the upcoming population scarcity of skilled personnel. While succession planning is a critical issue for all sectors, it is even more pressing within Canadian policing – the age distribution of middle management and executive groups in the RCMP is significantly older than their federal public service and private sector counterparts¹²². Consequently, police forces across Canada are facing significant labour shortages in the immediate future – both at the management and front line levels. Under these circumstances it is imperative that the law enforcement community focus on recruiting and retaining quality personnel. This task is made even more difficult in that policing will be competing with all the other occupational sectors for scarce human resources. Police forces need to be seen as “employers of choice” – there are many other career alternatives.

Addressing Workplace Stress in Law Enforcement

As is evident from the preceding discussion, the issue of workplace stresses in policing is highly complex, layered and specific to given organizations, units and individuals. Consequently, effective responses need to take a strategic and comprehensive approach. The overarching goal of a workplace wellness and organizational health initiative needs to incorporate three elements: building capacity, increasing resiliency, and supporting positive culture change.

The first stage of capacity building involves providing an effective, sustainable and comprehensive workplace wellness program for all staff and managers. This acts to establish a common understanding of the issues and supports individuals in defining the areas of strength and concern and then taking effective steps to maintain personal wellness. Management style and strategies play a very important role in many of the risk/resilience factors previously noted. Thus, capacity building also requires manager training regarding the constructs surrounding systemic and traumatic stress and the role of management in either promoting resilience or increasing distress.

Individual and group resiliency increases as staff and managers gain awareness of the issues and their roles, and as they make adaptive shifts in their attitudes and behaviours. As people deal successfully with the most pressing issues, they often become aware of less prominent areas of concern. With increased capacity for adaptive change, these second and third order issues are then more likely to be addressed. In general, once the wellness wheel starts turning, it often generates momentum as people become increasingly confident and knowledgeable.

At the most fundamental level, we are concerned with culture change. With moving toward a law enforcement culture that values its human resources, and possesses the skills and knowledge to cope innovatively with the wide range of presenting challenges.

Summary

Given our current understanding of the particular workplace stresses and challenges facing law enforcement personnel, and our knowledge about the mechanisms, effects and risk/resilience factors, it is imperative that police forces effectively address the issue. In addition to the specific internal strategies noted in the previous section, the law enforcement community and their employers need to consider the wider social context of policing. Elements such as funding levels, pension benefits, public support and respect, and media relationships all play a role in the stress levels experienced by members of the law enforcement community.

In summary, most Canadians would agree that a well-staffed, healthy and capable law enforcement community is a necessary component of a safe and healthy society. We cannot overstate the need to make a career in policing a desirable and tenable occupational choice if we are to maintain viable a law enforcement structure.

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