Stress and Stress Management in Policing
A cross-sectional analysis of the literature in the field

Mikael Nygren and Staffan Karp

JUNE 2010
WWW.IPES.INFO
WWW.DCAF.CH
The joint IPES and DCAF Working Paper Series is an open forum for the global community of police experts, researchers, and practitioners provided by the International Police Executive Symposium (IPES) and the Geneva Center for the Democratic Control of the Armed Forces (DCAF). It intends to contribute to worldwide dialogue and information exchange in policing issues by providing an access to publication and the global public sphere to the members of the interested community. In essence, the Working Paper Series is pluralist in outlook. It publishes contributions in all fields of policing and manuscripts are considered irrespective of their theoretical or methodological approach. The Series welcomes in particular contributions from countries of the South and those countries of the universe which have limited access to Western public sphere.

Members of the editorial board are Dominique Wisler (editor-in-chief, Coginta.org, Amman, Jordan), Philipp Fluri (Deputy Director of the Geneva Center for the Democratic Control of the Armed Forces, Geneva), Rick Sarre (professor of Law and Criminal Justice at the University of South Australia, Adelaide), Kam C. Wong (associate professor and chair of the Department of Criminal Justice of Xavier University, Ohio), and Ihewoaba D. Onwudiwe (professor of Administration of Justice at Texas Southern University).

Manuscripts can be sent electronically to the editorial board (wisler@coginta.org).

© 2010 by Mikael Nygren & Staffan Karp. All rights reserved. Short sections of this text, not to exceed two paragraphs, might be quoted without explicit permission provided full credit is given to the source.

The views and opinions expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the International Police Executive Symposium or the Geneva Center for the Democratic Control of the Armed Forces.
ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to map the literature on stress in police organizations and stress management for police officers. Results show that much of the stress management research has focused on the individual, despite that stress research over the past 25 years has shown that organisational stressors have major negative effects on individuals. Future research would benefit from a wider focus. Including several or all the levels described in this article will make it possible to develop new knowledge about stress-generating factors within police organizations, as well as new and more effective methods and techniques for stress management.

Mikael Nygren
PhD student
Department of Education
Umeå University, Sweden
e-mail: Mikael.nygren@ledarskapscentrum.se

Staffan Karp
Associate professor at Department of Education
Umeå University, Sweden
e-mail: staffan.karp@pedag.umu.se
Stress and Stress Management in Policing.
A cross-sectional analysis of the literature in the field

*Mikael Nygren and Staffan Karp*

Introduction

Work-related stress is a problem in many occupations in today’s society (Ainsworth, 2002) and police officers are no exception in this respect. According to Andersson, Swenson & Clay (1995) there are few professional groups that encounter such a broad spectrum of stressors as police officers. Christianson & Granhag (2004) found that, compared to other occupations, there is an elevated risk for police officers to be exposed to stressful and traumatic situations. Anderson, Litzenberger & Plecas (2002) argue that policing is one of the most stressful occupations in western society. In a report on threats against employees within the police organisation (RPS, 1999), the Swedish National Police Board concluded that stress knowledge, stress management, crisis theory, mental preparation, debriefing and the consequences and handling of burnout syndrome are essential areas of knowledge for police officers. Research has also shown that practicing police officers believe that stress management is one of the most important things to teach students at police academies (Ellonen, Nurmi, Raivola, Välitalo & Välitalo, 1998).

The purpose of this study was to map the available literature on stress in police organizations and stress management for police officers. Research on work-related stress has identified stressors at all levels within organisations (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Stressors exist at the individual level, group level, leadership level and organisational level. We have studied how stress and stress management at these levels are dealt with in the literature, and we have also analyzed the content of the documents included in the study and the methods described for each level.
Method

In our search for relevant literature, we used internet search engines and research databases (PsychInfo). Searches were conducted in May 2005 based on the keywords police and/or crisis resolution skills, mental training, mental preparation, stress management.

The literature thus found was then categorized according to type of document, the content of the document and the methods described at the individual, group, leadership or organisational level.

The different types of document were grouped as follows:

1. General literature
   
   Documents in this category are accounts by individuals who, in first hand written statements, tell about and reflect on specific events or matters, or on their whole lives (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). One example of such a document is a police officer’s own story of stress and stress management.

2. Research literature
   
   Documents in this category are articles published in scientific journals, dissertations, unpublished manuscripts based on scientific research and research-based literature often used at universities.

3. Official documents
   
   Documents in this category include official reports, published government studies, minutes from the Swedish parliament, curricula and other official publications.

The documents were also categorized according to whether they deal with stress and stress management at the individual, group, leadership or organisational level. Documents pertaining to more than one of these levels were classified at each level dealt with. We also included a survey of the methods and techniques described for each level.
Results

Using the above search criteria we identified a total of 62 documents, the majority of which belong to the research category (see Table I).

Table I. Categorization based on type of document.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Document</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General literature</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research literature</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissertation</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scientific journals</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meta analysis</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpublished manuscripts</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Official documents</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>62</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our analysis of the content with regard to each organisational level showed that the majority of the documents (41) discussed stress and stress management at the individual level while 21 were focused on stress at the group level, 7 on the leadership level and 16 on the organizational level (see Table II). While there are examples of literature describing and discussing two or more of these levels, the dominating pattern is that only one level is dealt with.
Table II. Categorization based on content at an individual, group, leadership and organisational level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of documents</th>
<th>Levels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General literature</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissertations</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scientific journals</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meta-analyses</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpublished manuscripts</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Official documents</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total count</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our analysis of the documents with regard to methods and techniques described as being useful in stress management showed a wide range of such methods and techniques at all levels (see Tables III, IV, V, VI). However, since the majority of the documents deal with stress management at the individual level, the largest number of techniques and methods were found in that category.

Table III. Methods and techniques for stress management at the individual level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual level</th>
<th>Progressive muscular relaxation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bio feedback</td>
<td>Knowledge about stress and stress reactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breathing techniques</td>
<td>Meditation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive methods</td>
<td>Mental preparation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive repetition/visualization</td>
<td>Physical exercise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concentration</td>
<td>SIT – Stress Inoculation Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructive inner conversations</td>
<td>Sleep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drills</td>
<td>Thought suppression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating habits</td>
<td>Triggers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mood management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table IV. Methods and techniques for stress management at the group level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group level</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>After action review</td>
<td>Evaluation of an event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis management</td>
<td>Peer support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debriefing</td>
<td>Social support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defusing</td>
<td>Teambuilding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective groups</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table V. Methods and techniques for stress management at the leadership level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership level</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education / Knowledge</td>
<td>Role overload</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leading in a crisis</td>
<td>Vague roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New leadership</td>
<td>Uncertain roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role conflicts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table VI. Methods and techniques for stress management at the organisational level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisational level</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Systems for caring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personnel division</td>
<td>Tertiary prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility of the police academies</td>
<td>Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary prevention</td>
<td>Primary prevention</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Discussion

The results show that the majority of the literature included in our study of stress and stress management in police organizations presents an individual perspective. This is interesting, considering that much of the research conducted in the past 25 years has shown that organisational stressors are the most common cause of stress in police officers at the workplace (Anderson et al. 1995; Anshel, 2000; Brown & Campbell, 1994; Copes, 2005; Ellison, 2004; Geerinck & Stark, 2003; Kates, 2001; Kurke & Scriver, 1995; Liberman, Best, Metzler, Fagan, Marmar & Weiss, 2002; Nygren, 2006; Scanff & Taugis, 2002 & Stephens och Long, 1998). This is not unique to police organizations. For instance, Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter (2001) find it paradoxical that burnout interventions tend to be focused
primarily on individual-centred solutions, given that research has found that situational and organisational factors play a bigger role in burnout than individual ones. Brustad & Ritter-Taylor (1997) found that research on stress and stress management has mainly been focused on the individual and on individual methods and techniques instead of taking the social context into consideration. Maslach & Goldberg (1998) explain the focus on the individual level with notions of individual causality and responsibility, and the assumption that it is easier and cheaper to change people than organisations.

In view of the above, and our own findings, we argue that future research into stress and stress management and the development of methods and techniques in police organisations will benefit from a larger and wider focus than mainly the individual level. With a research perspective that includes several or all of the levels described, it will be possible to generate new knowledge about the causes of stress within police organizations, as well as new and more effective methods and techniques for stress management.
Literature

General literature


Research

Dissertations


Books


**Scientific journals**


Meta analyses


Unpublished manuscripts


12350 Research Parkway, Orlando, FL, 32826-3276. Unpublished manuscript.


**Official documents**


**Other references**


*Applied Preventive psychology*. Vol. 7, No 1, p. 63-74


The International Police Executive Symposium (IPES) brings police researchers and practitioners together to facilitate cross-cultural, international and interdisciplinary exchanges for the enrichment of the policing profession. It encourages discussions and writing on challenging topics of contemporary importance through an array of initiatives including conferences and publications.

Founded in 1994 by Dilip K. Das, Ph.D., the IPES is a registered Not-For-Profit educational corporation. It is funded by the benefaction of institutional supporters and sponsors that host IPES events around the world.

The International Police Executive Symposium’s major annual initiative is a four-day meeting on specific issues relevant to the policing profession. Past meeting themes have covered a broad range of topics from police education to corruption. Meetings are organized by the IPES in conjunction with sponsoring organizations in a host country. To date, meetings have been held in North America, Europe, and Asia.

Detailed information on IPES can be found at: [www.IPES.info](http://www.IPES.info)