

## POLICE JOB STRESS IN THE USA

### ABD Polisinde İş Stresi

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#### Özet

Polislik, taşıdığı riskler, tehlikeler ve zorluk açısından diğer mesleklerle kıyaslanmayacak kadar stresli bir meslektir. Polisler, çalışma koşulları itibariyle aileleri ve sosyal yaşamlarına az zaman ayırabilmekte ve bu nedenle de yoğun bir strese maruz kalabilmektedirler. Bu çalışma, polislerin görev başında yaşadıkları stres durumlarını ele alarak strese etki eden faktörleri incelemektedir. Bu makalede kullanılan veri seti, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin Baltimore şehrinde 1100 polise uygulanan "Polis Aileleri İçerisindeki Stres ve Aile İçi Şiddet" isimli çalışmadan alınmıştır. Bu makalede, polislerin işlerini stresli bulmalarına etki eden faktörler, çoklu regresyon analizi yöntemi uygulanarak analiz edilmiş ve şu bulgular elde edilmiştir: Görev başında sürekli olarak zor kullanılarak gözaltı yapan memurlar ile görev başında şehit düşen meslektaşlarının cenaze törenlerine katılan polislerin strese maruz kalma ihtimallerinin daha fazla olduğu bulunmuştur. Ayrıca, zenci polislerin, beyaz polislere oranla strese maruz kalma olasılıklarının daha az olduğu görülmüştür. Bir diğer sonuç ise, devriye hizmeti yapan polislerin diğer birimlerde çalışan polislere oranla daha fazla strese maruz kalma ihtimalinin olduğu tespit edilmiştir. Bu bulgular doğrultusunda, çalışmamızın sonuç bölümünde polislerin stres ile mücadele yöntemleriyle ilgili tavsiyelerde bulunulmuştur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Stres, Polis, ABD Polisi, Polis İş Stresi.

#### Abstract

Considering the hardship and the danger of the tasks it involves, policing is one of the most stressful jobs compared to other professions. Police officers work under conditions that produce

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stress, which leaves only a limited time for families and social activities. This paper discusses police officers' depression about their jobs and examines the stressors in policing. The dataset for this study was obtained from a survey conducted in the Baltimore Police Department, United States, titled: "Police Stress and Domestic Violence in Police Families." The purpose of the study is to show the causes and effects of feeling negative/ depressed about work by using multiple regression analysis. The findings reveal that officers who make violent arrests are more likely to feel negative/ depressed about work; officers who attend a police funeral are more likely to feel negative/depressed about work; African American police officers are less likely to feel negative or depressed about their jobs than whites; and patrol officers are more likely to feel negative/depressed about work than the other ranks. Finally, suggestions are provided to reduce the police job stress.

**Key Words:** Stress, Police, USA Police, Police Job Stress.

## **Introduction**

Stress, particularly among law enforcement officers, has been a focus of research in recent years. It is obvious that police have one of the most stressful jobs among the professions and they have hard and dangerous work. For the law enforcement officer, the strains and tensions experienced at work are unique, and sometimes unavoidable. Police officers work under conditions that produce stress, which leaves only a limited time for families and social activities. Police officers also face unusual, often highly disturbing situations, like seeing a dead body, killing someone or witnessing his fellow being killed in the line of duty, and thus the consequences of police job stress can adversely impact the delivery of effective law enforcement.

This study examines the causes and effects of job-related stress that affects the law enforcement officers and their families. This study uses survey data from Baltimore, Maryland. A total of 1,100 police officers volunteered to participate in the survey, which was conducted between 1997-1999. Feeling negative/depressed about work is the indicator of stress. In this regard, the purpose of the study is to show the causes and

effects of feeling negative/ depressed about work by using multiple regression analysis.

Further, this study aims to see the factors that have the most effect on the behavior of feeling negative/ depressed about job. In the analysis, the following three independent variables are used: Making violent arrest, responding to a bloody crime scene, and attending a police funeral. Ethnicity, gender, education, marital status, and rank are used as control variables in the analysis.

## **1. Literature Review**

Police job is considered to be a highly stressful profession, because police officers are frequently exposed to the most violent, disruptive, and distrustful elements of society. In addition, they are expected to use discretion under dangerous circumstances (Crank and Caldero, 1991; Violanti and Aron, 1994). Scholars have long discussed that police officers' job performance can be affected harmfully when they experience chronic stress (McGreedy, 1974; Goodman, 1990).

In comparison with other occupations, police work has been identified as a particularly stressful occupation (Crank and Caldero, 1991). Negative aspects of the job such as boredom, lack of respect from members of the public, excessive paperwork, contacts with the public that are sometimes negative and challenging, shift work, threats of violence, and the militaristic nature of the hierarchical and bureaucratic nature of policing are among the job stressors that mostly confront police officers. As a result of these stressful aspects of policing and others, a variety of symptoms and reactions may occur. These include deteriorating work performance (absenteeism, low morale) and negative psychosomatic and physical conditions (headaches, ulcers). The stresses of policing have been offered as one reason capable police officers leave the profession for other careers (Burke, 1989) or even commit suicide. Thus, it is important to have a productive and healthy police service that serves as an important contributor to the stability and well-being of a country. Therefore, it is necessary to examine potential factors that causes stress for police officers.

It is evident that police work is often cited as one of the most stressful occupations. There are five major sources of police stress that are frequently identified in the literature:

- The work environment,
- Availability of peer support and trust,
- Social and family influence,
- Bureaucratic characteristics of police organizations, and
- Accessibility of coping mechanisms (Kroes, 1975; Violanti, 1985; Goodman, 1990).

The first major source of stress, which is the focus of this study, identified in police work is associated with the unique work environment of police officers. The danger associated with police work is usually highlighted in surveys of law enforcement officers where police officers are asked to rank-order a list of possible stressors. Not surprisingly, the death of a partner or having to take a life in the line of duty are typically among the top stressors identified by officers (Coman and Evans 1991; Violanti and Aron, 1994). Overall, violent and unpredictable incidents involved in police work are commonly considered to be the leading sources of both psychological and physical stress among law enforcement officers.

## **2. Methodology**

The data set was obtained from a survey study, titled “Police Stress and Domestic Violence in Police Families in Baltimore, Maryland, 1997-1999” conducted by Robyn Gershon. This data set was acquired from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research’s (ICPSR) website.

The unit of analysis is the law enforcement officers who voluntarily completed the questionnaires. Questionnaires were distributed to approximately 1,100 police officers who volunteered to participate in the survey from a total of more than 2,500 full-time sworn officers who were in attendance during the morning and/or evening roll calls at each of the nine Baltimore precincts.

The sampling strategy that was used in data collection for Gershon’s study involved three steps:

1) Obtain the total number of sworn employees in each precinct for all shifts,

2) Attend one or two roll calls for each shift in all nine of the Baltimore precincts and main headquarters to obtain a convenience sample of volunteers, and

3) Distribute self-administered questionnaires to police officers who volunteered to participate in the study. The reported response rate was sixty-eight percent in the original study (see Gershon, 1999 for more details). The five-page instrument distributed to Baltimore police officers included questions regarding symptoms of psychological and physical stress and likely stressors, perceptions of current stress levels, coping mechanisms to deal with stress, and health outcomes related to stress.

Multivariate regression analysis is used as the statistical method to test the hypotheses. In addition, with multiple regression we can study the relationship between a single dependent variable and more than one independent variables. Moreover, we could use it both for prediction and causal analysis.

## ***2.1. Hypotheses***

- Officers who make more violent arrests are more likely to feel negative/ depressed about work.
- Officers who respond to a bloody crime scene are more likely to feel negative/depressed about work.
- Officers who attend a police funeral are more likely to feel negative/depressed about work.

## ***2.2. Dependent Variable***

### *Feeling Negative/Depressed About Work*

In this study, “feeling negative/depressed about” work is used as the indicator of stress. The question for this variable is “How often is the follo-

wing statement true? I feel negative, futile or depressed about work” and the answer options are: “Never”, “Sometimes”, “Frequently”, “Always”. Response categories are rated from 1 (Never) to 4 (Always). The measurement level of this variable is ordinal and it has 23 missing values, which equals only 2.1% of the 1081 observations in the data set.

### ***2.3. Independent Variables***

The current study includes three independent variables in one major context, which is the work environment. Three variables are used to represent the characteristics unique to the police work environment: Making violent arrest, Responding to a bloody crime scene, and attending a police funeral.

#### *Making Violent Arrest*

The question is, “If you have ever experienced any of the following, please indicate how much it emotionally affected you?” and the answer options are coded as: “Never=1”, “Sometimes=2”, “Frequently=3”, “Always=4”. It also has an ordinal level of measurement. The missing observations of this variable is 120 of 1104 that equals to 10.9% as a percentage.

#### *Responding to a Bloody Crime Scene*

The question is, “If you have ever experienced any of the following, please indicate how much it emotionally affected you?” and the answer options are coded as: “Never=1”, “Sometimes=2”, “Frequently=3”, “Always=4”. It also has an ordinal level of measurement. The missing observations of this variable is 111 of 1104 that equals to 10.1 % as a percentage.

#### *Attending a Police Funeral*

The question is, “If you have ever experienced any of the following, please indicate how much it emotionally affected you?” and the answer options are coded as: “Never=1”, “Sometimes=2”, “Frequently=3”, “Always=4”. It is an ordinal level variable. The missing observations of this variable is 119 of 1104 that equals to 18.0 % as a percentage.

## 2.4. Demographic Factors

Five demographic variables are used as control measures in this analysis:

- Ethnicity,
- Gender,
- Education,
- Marital Status, and
- Rank.

Prior studies suggest that officers' rank and years of police service are important job-related characteristics related with exposure to stressors and experience of their consequences (Robinson, 1981; Fielding, 1987). Other studies found inconsistent and weak relationships of stress and individual demographic characteristics (e.g., Maslach, 1982; Burke, 1993). I included these five variables to control for spuriousness.

I recoded these variables as dichotomous variables<sup>1</sup>: Ethnicity, African American is coded as 1 and Caucasian, Hispanic, and others are coded as 0; Gender is coded as 1.Male, 2.Female; for marital status, married is coded as 1 and other 0. Finally, current rank, officer is coded as 1, and all other ranks coded as 0.

## 3. Findings

Table 1 reports the major demographic characteristics of the survey respondents. The survey sample includes 943 male officers (86%) and 157 female officers (14%). There are 696 white officers (63%), and 355 African American officers (32%). Few respondents are in the other racial categories. For the simplicity of comparison, percentages for the variable *ethnicity* are calculated based on White and African American officers only. About sixty percent of officers in this survey are married. The majority of the respondents (70%) do not have a college degree. 54% of the survey respondents stated their ranks as police officer.

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<sup>1</sup> In this data, ethnicity is coded as: 1-African American, 2-Caucasian, 3- Hispanic, and 4-Other; Rank is coded as: 1-Officer Trainee, 2- Officer, 3-Agent, 4-Detective, 5- Sergeant, and 6-Lieutenant and above.

**Table 1:** Descriptive Statistics of the Demographic Variables

Variables	n	%
Gender		
Female	157	14.3
Male	943	85.7
Ethnicity		
White	696	66.2
African American	355	33.8
Marriage		
Not Married	441	40.1
Married	658	59.9
Education		
B.A. & +	326	29.8
Less than B.A.	768	70.2
Rank		
Others	499	45.2
Officer	601	54.8

Table 2 presents the impact of work environment and demographic factors on police stress. The results of regression analysis indicate that there is a statistically significant relationship between making violent arrest and feeling negative/depressed about work ( $t=3.053$ ,  $p=.002$ ), and the direction of the relationship is positive. Officers who make violent arrests are more likely to feel negative/ depressed about work, after controlling for other factors. The more they make violent arrest, the more they feel negative/depressed about work.

Another statistically significant relationship is found between attending a police funeral and feeling negative/depressed about job ( $p=.024$ ,  $t=2.263$ ). This means that officers who attend a police funeral are more likely to feel negative/depressed about work, after controlling for other factors. The direction of the relationship is also positive. In other words, the more police funerals they attend, the more they are likely to feel depressed from their jobs.

There is not a statistically significant relationship between responding to a bloody crime scene and feeling negative/ depressed about work. Of the two significant independent variables the one, which has the greatest im-



pact on feeling depressed about work is making violent arrest (as indicated by the standardized beta coefficients<sup>2</sup>, not reported in the table).

**Table 2:** The Impact of Work Environment and Demographic Factors on Police Job Stress

VARIABLES	FEELING NEGATIVE/DEPRESSED ABOUT WORK <sup>3</sup>		
	B (Unstandardized Coefficients) (S.E)	Probability	T test
Making violent arrest	.135 (.044)	<b>.002</b>	3.053
Responding to a bloody crime scene	.011 (.041)	.785	.273
Attending a police funeral	.101 (.045)	<b>.024</b>	2.263
African	-.182 (.059)	<b>.002</b>	-3.115
Male	-.056 (.076)	.461	-.737
Police officer	.125 (.055)	<b>.024</b>	2.258
Education	-.012 (.038)	.745	-.325
Married	.033 (.054)	.530	.628
Constant	1.196		
N	842		
Adj. R Square	.036		
F	4.887	<b>.000</b>	

**Source:** The data were obtained from a survey study titled: “Police Stress and Domestic Violence in Police Families in Baltimore”, Maryland, USA, 1997-1999 by Robyn Gershon. Unstandardized regression coefficients, standard errors in parenthesis; probabilities based on 2-tailed test. Statistically significant coefficients ( $p < .05$ ) in bold.

<sup>2</sup> Standardized coefficients (beta) in the regression analysis tell us the strength of the independent variables; the beta, which has a bigger value, has a stronger effect on the dependent variable, and has the most explanatory power.

<sup>3</sup> The question for this variable is “How often is the following statement true? I feel negative, futile or depressed about work”, and the answer options are: “Never”, “Sometimes”, “Frequently”, “Always”, “Unknown” (ordinal level). Response categories are rated from 1 (Never) to 4 (Always).

When I examine the five demographic factors, I see that the variables that have statistically significant relationship with the dependent variable (feeling depressed about work) are ethnicity and rank (see table 2). There was no relationship between the other three control variables that are gender, education, and marital status and feeling depressed about job.

It might be assumed that African American officers are more likely to feel depressed about their jobs than whites. This analysis tells us otherwise, because the direction of the relationship is negative (Unstandardized Coefficient value is  $-.0182$ ). African American police officers are less likely to feel negative or depressed about their jobs than whites ( $p=.002$ ,  $t=-3.115$ ).

Rank (police officer) is the second control variable which has a significant relationship between the dependent variable ( $p=.024$ ,  $t=2.258$ ). I found that police officers are more likely to feel negative/depressed about work than the other ranks (Officer trainee, Agent, Detective, Sergeant, Lieutenant and above).

In this regression model, 3.6% (Adjusted R Square) of the variation is explained by the independent variables. This is a low rate, but it is not very important in the survey data. The F test is also significant ( $.00 < .05$ ), which means our overall model is significant. Multicollinearity is a potentially serious problem associated with the use of ordinary least square (OLS) regression analysis. Accordingly, the tolerance values in the collinearity statistics often are used to detect whether collinearity exists among independent variables. The collinearity statistics run on this model showed that none of the tolerance values exceeded  $.10$ . It is safe to say that multicollinearity was not a problem in this analysis.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined the causes and effects of job-related stress that affects the police officers by using a survey data from Baltimore Police Department, Maryland. A total of 1.100 officers were responded to the survey. This research aimed to show the causes and effects of feeling negative/ depressed about work by using multiple regression analysis. The following three independent variables were used in the analysis: Making violent arrest, responding to a bloody crime scene, and attending a police funeral. The control variables were: Ethnicity, gender, education, marital status, and rank.

It was hypothesized that officers who make more violent arrests are more likely to feel negative/ depressed about work; officers who respond to a bloody crime scene are more likely to feel negative/depressed about work; and officers who attend a police funeral are more likely to feel negative/depressed about work.

The findings reveal that officers who make violent arrests are more likely to feel negative/ depressed about work; officers who attend a police funeral are more likely to feel negative/depressed about work; African American police officers are less likely to feel negative or depressed about their jobs than whites; and police officers are more likely to feel negative/depressed about work than the other ranks.

Police job stress is an important issue that no police agency can afford to overlook. Stress management in policing is essential, because police work is such a highly stressful profession. In addition, police officers that are unable to effectively deal with stress might fail to provide efficient and quality police services to citizens. In accordance with this study, the police job is more likely to produce stress. To reduce the stress, the stressors should be mitigated by creating better life and work conditions, as well as opportunities. This will allow, the officers to work more efficiently and show greater job performance. The most common method for preventing stress is to train officers to recognize its signs and sources and to develop individual coping strategies. Training helps encourage officers to use stress reduction techniques and services.

With regard to improving police officers' coping skills, police stress management programs should be adapted to fit the particular needs of a police department. A reasonable approach might include the following three main mechanisms:

- Assessment of police officers' physical and psychological stress, which includes identifying both internal and external stressors,
- Monitoring police officers' adaptive and maladaptive coping skills, and
- Effective use of appropriate intervention strategies such as peer counseling. In particular, peer counseling could be a realistic and effective way to deal with police officer stress (Klyver, 1983).

Finally, police stress management programs could also benefit from learning the divergent impact of work environment and coping mechanisms on police stress.

The findings derived from the analysis were based on a large police department located in the east coast of the USA. Therefore, the results might be more informative to large police agencies compared to medium-sized, or smaller police agencies. Secondly, it would be better to do research for greater numbers from broader jurisdictions in future studies on this topic. In this regard, similar researchers should be conducted in the Turkish National Police. Even though there are several studies on police stress (Yeşilorman, 2003; Ulukuş, 2003; İmroğlu, 2001), they are mostly theoretical. Although police do the similar jobs in every country, the stressors might be different in each country. Different factors, such as culture, organizational structure, fiscal problems, social status of police etc., might determine the level of stress in policing. For example, Turkey has been struggling with terrorism over 30 years and many officers have been killed by terrorists. This significant factor might cause stress on police officers. Researchers should conduct surveys in the Turkish National Police in order to explore the stressors in the organization.

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