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Police Tasks and Related Stress Factors
From An
Organizational Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

It would seem that the world knows implicitly, if not explicitly, that the police of this country evidence many symptoms of stress. Students of police administration, especially practitioners, constantly grapple with questions that are the products of stress: How should we treat alcoholism in the police organization? What strategies are available to the police to minimize the incidence of heart attacks? What can be done to reduce the exorbitant rate of divorce among the members of our police forces? These are only a few of the problems which may be related to anxiety and stress among policemen.

Assumptions

The approach in this paper recognizes that potential and actual stress, produced by a variety of factors and situations, and manifested by a variety of behaviors, illnesses, and costs, is significant. The costs may result in a myriad of environmental, interpersonal and organizational expenditures both human and financial. Therefore, it would be a travesty not to deal with the issue in a manner reflecting its complexity.

There is a tendency among professionals, who are busily reacting to various problems--because their worlds allow little room for before-the-fact proactive strategies--to deal directly with the issue of alcoholism, for example, as the responsibility of the victim-alcoholic; therefore, to be eliminated by the appropriate disciplinary action. This kind of administrative behavior is most efficient. For the organization, the problem is gone. (Everyone knows you can't have brain-damaged alcoholics making decisions about citizens' liberties! So he is fired.) Whether or not this form of problem-solving is effective is up for grabs.

Another assumption is that police work is different from any other kind of enterprise. Of course, it would be presumptuous and dishonest to indulge that notion. This is to say that many causes of anxiety are similar in any kind of human endeavor. For the purpose of this discussion, it is safe to say there are some "stressors" which tend to be unique to the profession. Some strategies may be appropriate for consideration by other organizations as well as public safety.

There are probably many ways in which we may approach this subject. One is the systematic exploration of alternatives from a theoretical perspective; developing our hypotheses and, tapping into our limited resources, testing our

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hypotheses. Another is to look around us for examples of trial and error of a large variety of promising strategies: some involved and complicated; others relatively simple.

Our discussion recognizes the overwhelming complexity of the subject, but assumes that administrative factors contribute heavily to the cause of stress among policemen. Further, experience finds many of the management and organizational issues in police administration discussed here are characteristic of most police organizations. Our "organizational" approach separates into four general areas: Environmental, Interpersonal, Administrative and Strategies for the Reduction of Stress. It seems useful to attempt to identify situations and issues contributing to anxiety in the categories of environment, interpersonal and administration and then generalize about strategies. The interrelationships among the four areas are beyond our immediate comprehension. There will be implicit assumptions about the interactions in order to enhance discussion and interdisciplinary exchange.

Environmental Factors

Conditions, circumstances, situations, and influences impacting upon the police personality and generating stress may be grouped as those arising directly from work and personal experiences prior and subsequent to becoming a police officer and pressures created by positive and negative experiences with personal, public and organizational expectations.

Work Related

There is likely to be an infinite list of work related issues which have a disturbing effect on members of the organization. Many of these issues were highlighted in a recent article by Wm. Kroes.¹

Work related environmental costs result from what is frequently a constant immersion in an extremely demanding and degrading milieu, physically, emotionally, and psychologically, for much of the policeman's working life. Personal experience as a vice enforcement officer required daily contact with a clientele which generally reflected the dregs of society--such as prostitutes, drug abusers, sexual perverts--ad infinitum. The personality erosion, both personal and observed, generally reaches excessive limits in three to four years.

Administration policies and procedures about which the rank and file have no voice, or the opposite situation where command and supervisory officers subvert departmental policies and procedures, generate work related stresses upon the majority.

The scarcity and inadequacy of departmental resources is another source of consternation. It would seem that the level of stress should be related to the

1. Wm. H. Kroes, et. al., "Job Stress in Police Administrators," Journal of Police Administration, Vol. 2, No. 4, December 1974, pp 381-387. (See Appendix A for a list of specific issues and situations which may contribute to police employee anxiety and tension.)

perceived personal threat or inconvenience to the officer. If the departmental budget could not accommodate the purchase of new patrol vehicles every 30-35 thousand miles, the situation may be less stress producing than the decision not to equip the vehicles with equipment likely to protect life such as first-aid kits, armored vests or fire extinguishers. Budgetary considerations traverse the entire gamut of work related situations, ranging from overwork as result of inadequate manpower to improving the work environment of the station house in the provision of adequate janitorial services and periodic painting.

Personal

As we all know, each policeman as a unique individual brings to the tasks of policing a personality which is the product of his total life experience and a constitutional inheritance from his ancestors. Given that we have selected only those which are fit to serve, personal anxieties, both primary and secondary, are presented by professional situations such as rotating shifts. The individual may not be able to accommodate working a night shift. All bodily functions may be disturbed as a direct result of the shift change. The officer is irritable. In turn, a secondary causal connection may be overreaction by or in the arrest of a recalcitrant drunk. His anxieties may then be reinforced by a whole host of things like a civil law suit, a supervisor who begins to over-supervise and perceptions about shrinking career opportunities and promotions.

Public

The expectations of the public which are promulgated or, perhaps, defined by the mass media are often impossible or inappropriate. American society in general has carefully avoided the role definition in any formal way. The romanticism and fantasy which surrounds any number of popular television programs significantly influences the public's view of police work as well as the perceptions of young men who desire to be policemen or are new to the force. The reality for all these audiences is something less than depicted. An old sage once observed that the public view of the police forces in the United States tends to be that projected by the television media when the truth of the matter is likely to be the other extreme. Our publics have a sense of security that cannot be delivered. That stress is the product ought to be obvious.

Another facet of the environmental causes is related to the reality of police tasks in terms of the unknown and unpreparedness. It is a popular pastime to review police field reports and calls for service and make after-the-fact judgements about the nature of the work. One observation is the conclusion: "Eighty percent of police tasks are service calls." There are many calls, false burglar alarms for example, which are responded to as though they were actual burglaries. The stress on the officer is no different than if he had answered a burglary call. Similarly, there is an element of the unknown about many "calls for service" which are unlikely to give cues like a burglar case provides and which are equally stressful. This is the nature of the work and few preventive strategies are available.

It hasn't been until recently that we are finding a growing number of departments attempting to identify tasks for which most policemen are unprepared. As we identify them, training and educational strategies are concocted. An example is the various crisis intervention techniques under development for a number of police tasks.

Interpersonal Factors

Our interpersonal relationships may be the most important of our three generalized categories of stressors. At least it probably will be the most difficult to improve.

Personality Diversity

There is no place like a police department to observe the wide spectrum of personality types. The world generally views policemen as a specific type: "...usually authoritarian; inclined toward compulsiveness," etc. The astute observer, absent political and various other "axes to grind" finds the opposite. The remarkable thing is that every policeman, with few exceptions, is as different as the variations in the rest of the population!

Physical-Emotional

Interpersonal relationships among policemen are likely to parallel those found among similar groups with comparable selection standards, although I can't think of many. Few organizations subject their personnel to the colander of personnel standards of policemen. Physical and emotional "problems" are generally excluded by the completion of the probation period. Minor physical or emotional problems in another occupation are likely to be major in a police department. I have no doubt an admitted homosexual in a police role would succumb to peer pressure with a coronary or slash his wrists!

Friedman and Rosenman in their descriptions of Type A and Type B characteristics in relation to heart disease found the Type A (those most likely to suffer heart attacks) individuals in life situations with a sense of "deadlines and time urgency," "excessive competitive drive," and a "free-floating hostility."² At this time we may argue the "chicken or the egg" issue. The police personality may have brought his Type A personality to the enterprise. On the other hand, the levels of competition for success within the closed police organizations, the deadlines and time urgency, and well-rationalized and socially acceptable hostility are well-known by policemen. Given young, tractable police personalities, I am certain about the ability to create Type A's from Type B's. We might disagree with Friedman and Rosenman when they say,

We have not found any clear correlation
between occupational position held and
the incident of Type A Behavior Pattern.³

If the modern police organization should create the Type A Personality Behavior, we may wish to consider strategies which would minimize the issues of competition, deadlines and hostility.

2. Meyer Friedman and Ray Rosenman, Type A Behavior and Your Heart (Greenwich, Connecticut, : Fawcett Publications, 1074), p. 79

3. ibid, p. 85

Personality Costs

In addition to the personality "erosion" resulting from the circumstances of our interaction with amoral characters of the vice and criminal underworld there are "costs" related to decision making in daily, albeit extraordinary, kinds of police action. Most policemen become quickly accustomed to arresting people and depriving them of their liberty, because clearing cases by arrest has been one of our traditional measures of efficiency. Initially it is distasteful and anxiety-producing. In short order most of the stress dissipates. However, the decision to use deadly force and, perhaps, take human life is traumatic. I have yet to meet a policeman, who having taken a human life in the line of duty, is not deeply troubled as a result. This is only one example; there must be many more.

Administrative Factors

Of our three "pigeon-holes," administrative factors are the easiest to change in the short-run. Factors related to environment and inter-personal relationships are more likely to be resistant to alteration and modification. Unfortunately, this category runs the gamut of what we think we know about administration and what is appropriate administrative behavior. There are many issues which are controversial and, indeed, alien to most police organizations. Obviously, space and time constraints preclude review of most.

Administration for our purposes may be defined simply as management and organization. Dwight Waldo suggests we may conceptualize organization as the anatomy and management as the physiology of administration, intertwined and mutually dependant.⁴

There is an inherent danger in failing to view a police enterprise as a interrelated and finely tuned system. Therefore, our isolation of any one or several administrative factors must assume a variety of preferred managerial and organizational factors are in place and functioning in a systematic and complimentary way.

Work Climate

That police organizations are managed in an authoritarian, as opposed to humanitarian way is most likely. We theorize that this kind of work climate is most desirable because of the danger of the job and the intense parallels which exist between police work and the work of the military forces. However, with the advent of higher personnel selection criteria and other personnel practices we are accomodating more college and univeristy professionals. A professional does not like to accept the status quo. In the absence of movement toward a work climate, which seeks employee participation in administrative decisions affecting their work, the costs in anxiety and hostility may be intense. The advent of police unions and employee activism is related, in part, to this issue.

4. Dwight Waldo, The Study of Public Administration (New York: Random House, Inc. 1955), p. 6

Our authoritarian structure finds us seeking the "responsible" person and holding him "accountable" for the consequences of his wrong decisions, or other failures no matter what the circumstances or pressures of expediency.

Communication

Almost all organizations suffer with communication problems which are caused by many things. None have perfect communications and there are very few which do not experience serious problems.⁵ All are related generally to failures related to the administrative system, the attitudes of people and the inabilities of personnel.

As manager, too often we fail to design our organizational communication systems by careful study and attention to coordination with the rest of the enterprise, and in view of ongoing organization objectives. If communication is so insufficient as not to provide needed information, or not to provide it at an appropriate time, or provides more than is needed, decision-making suffers and anxiety mounts.

Where the attitudes of personnel are such that mutual respect is nil, the resulting negativism limits communication and contributes to stress.

The inabilities of people to communicate is directly related to the quality of personnel and their differing frames of reference. It is obvious that selection of the best people available and an orientation, training and education which strengthens the desire to understand should result in improved communications and more job satisfaction.

Organizational Design

Until recently, perhaps the last ten years, little attention has been paid to the anatomy of the police organization. The skeletal structure has found police organization designed much the same as military units where ascending hierarchical levels beginning with operational field personnel, escalate into infinity to the apex of the office of chief or commissioner. Without laboring this organizational phenomenon, our hypothesis is that the decisions for specialization and the division of work and resulting uncoordinated organization efforts are the sources of significant amounts of anxiety.

We shall limit our administrative factors to the three we have discussed in the interest of delineated various strategies which may be useful remedies.

Strategies for Reduction of Stress

The objectives of the various countermeasures available to us should be directed toward the improvement of efficiency and effectiveness and, simultaneously, toward the enhancement of employee job satisfaction. Some would suggest these are incompatible objectives. I think not. Effectiveness, defined as doing the right things, and efficiency, defined as doing the right

5. Aubrey C. Sanford, Human Relations Theory and Practice (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1973) p. 237

things right, should be balanced against the needs of the internal enterprise--that of providing a satisfying work experience for its members. It seems to me the essence of organization.

General and Specific Plans

In general our plan for change to minimize stress ought to embrace our best thinking to:

1. Provide the best appropriate training and education as well as incentives to learn on an ongoing basis;
2. Determine departmental objectives in human terms which will find support among administrators, supervisors, operational employees, and the people within the jurisdiction being served;
3. Recognize the need and work toward implementation of generalized crime and hazard prevention programs; and
4. Routinely refine and seek to improve the communication processes at every level of the organization.

The problem with generalized kinds of responses is they often serve to provide convenient rationalizations. How many times have we heard the excuse for failures: "What we need is more training." Without specificity we might well talk about the weather!

Specific shifts in emphasis which are appropriate for the reduction of stress in the areas of environmental, interpersonal and administrative factors are to:

5. Provide employee and family counseling regularly for personnel so each may deal more effectively with stresses;
6. Establish rotational personnel staffing policies which would minimize personality erosion and provide new and challenging experiences for all employees every three or four years;
7. Implement a philosophy of human relations in personnel management which would employ all that is known about motivation and persuasion; one which would exercise adequate control and seek work satisfaction for all employees;
8. Seek commitments from legislative authorities and citizens for adequate resources after demonstrating the need for increased funding levels;
9. Minimize insecurity and anxiety among all members by providing employees with an opportunity to be heard; communicate all information and reasons for changes affecting their jobs and major policies; provide prompt answers to questions and solicit help from all employees in the solution of problems;

10. Adhere to employee recruitment and selection practices which satisfy legal requirements and implement the best thinking of personnel administration;
11. Communicate with the public on an ongoing basis to strengthen the notion that the police are the public and the public are the police. Direct communication by operational people will provide both media and citizens with realistic expectations about police tasks; and
12. Implement the best of small group theory in order that anxieties may diminish by the presence of group responsibility rather than individual accountability for the accomplishment of organizational objectives. For every problem discussed in this paper, team policing is likely to improve upon standard practices.

Summary and Conclusions

Anxiety and stress represent a variety of significant costs which can be improved by an interdisciplinary attack. There is not now, nor will there be in the foreseeable future, a single panacea to eliminate police employee stress. Neither are there multiple strategies which, ingested in mass, will prevent all stress. It is clear that necessary improvements will be realized only when the police and the public decide it is important!

Appendix A

ISSUES AND FACTORS IN POLICE JOB STRESS

Personal:

Background, personality and personal experience.
Health status.
Selection and recruitment.
Family/separation/social events.
Feeling of achievement.
Employee/personal relationships.

Administration: Organization and Management:

Administration policies and procedures.
Higher echelon support of administrators.
Rotating shift work schedule.
Feelings of not accomplishing anything.
More work than can be done in a given period of time.
Excessive paperwork and red tape in personnel complaint procedures.
Crosschecks within the police system and the "nit picking"
bureaucracy one was required to endure to carry out the
essentials of the job.
Lack of voice in decisions that directly affect the job.
Transfers from command without any prior consultation.
Work overload.
Work ambiguity.
Excessive paperwork at any operational level.
Making decisions without sufficient information.
Work conflict.
Relationships with superiors.
Relationships with subordinates.
Adverse effect on home/life.
Not being able to spend enough time with children.
Missing social events with family.
Irregular work-hour routines.
Detrimental effect on wives and children by poor public image
of policemen.
Pressures of taking the job home, causing to be overly harsh with
children and hard to live with.
Too much stress from being the man in the middle.
Directly bearing the wrath of public and superiors when complaints
are made.
Held accountable for the consequences of his wrong decisions
made under pressure of expediency.
Little to say in the selection of subordinates.
Incurring the wrath of subordinates for decisions made at higher
level.
Worries about support from superiors.
Inconsistency in supervision.
Overtime pay practices/or lack of.

Administration: Organization and Management: (continued)

Workload/manpower; divisions of work.
Staffing decisions.
Public opinion/apathy/politics/alienation.
Measures of efficiency and effectiveness; department objectives.
Lack of training.
Internal investigations.
Plant and working environment.
Media relationships.
Job security.
Participation in decision making.
Civil Services issues.
Misconceptions/ignorance as related to administration theory.
Organizational rumors/communication/coordination.
Employer-employee relations.
Dangerous job/level of perception.
Promotions/advancement.
Professional commitment of top executives.
Not knowing what job is/what is expected.
Incompetence of leadership.
Lack of coordination.
Responsibilities without commensurate authority - given tasks
without clear authority to accomplish them.
Leadership flexibility vs. rigidity.
Self-centered, self serving leadership.
Decisions by default; passing the buck.
Financial well-being of personnel.
Presence of corruption.
Self-image vs. society's view.
Absence of physical fitness program.

Resources:

Adequacy of equipment.
Lack of equipment.
Poor condition of equipment.
Adequacy of manpower.

Community Relations:

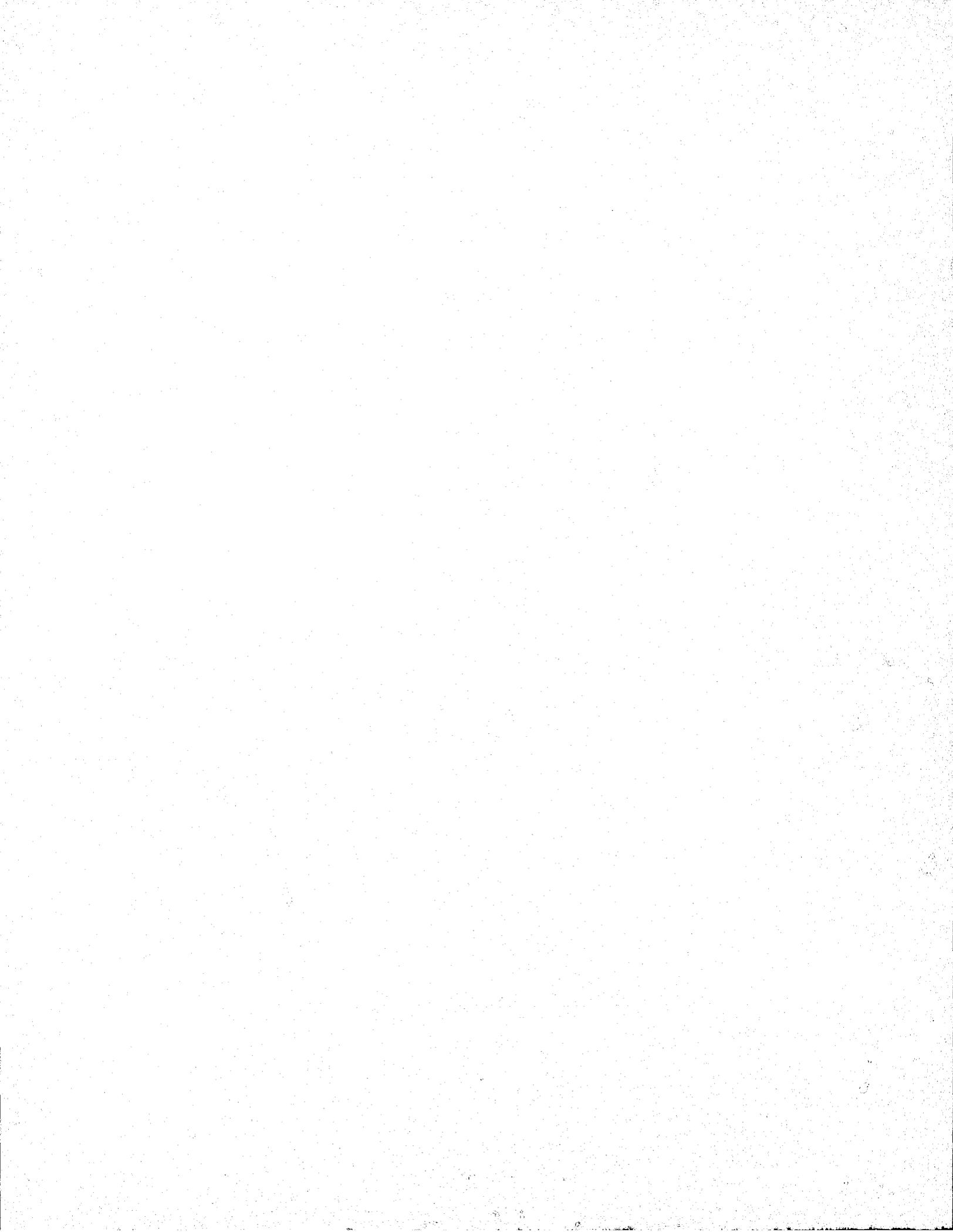
Public Apathy.
Ignorance.
Citizen complaints and demands.
Citizen lack of awareness and concern for the total mission of the
police force.
Public apathy to)
Negative reaction to) - policemen
Lack of support of)
Unwarranted investigations against patrolmen.
Assaults on subordinate officers.
Taking disciplinary actions against their subordinates.
Making amends with the public for mistakes made by patrolmen.
New assignments.

Courts

Lack of consideration in scheduling court appearances;
discontent of policemen and complaints.
Court leniency toward criminals.
Lack of knowledge about the law and all justice processes.

Questions to be asked of policemen:

What is bothersome about the job?
What bothers the other administrators?
What are administrative situations which cause anxiety?
When was the last time you were comfortable on the job?



END