

Helping Probation and Parole Officers Cope With Stress

By National Institute of Justice Staff

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Correctional agencies are losing money, losing good employees and jeopardizing officer and public safety due to work-related stress. An NIJ-funded study¹ to examine the causes and effects of stress on probation and parole officers found, surprisingly, that most of their work-related stress stems, not from physical dangers, but from high caseloads, overwhelming paperwork and excessive deadlines. The study also found that developing a stress reduction program can be an effective solution that can save money and enhance officer and public safety.

The Study

To identify the nature and scope of probation and parole officer stress, researchers reviewed published and unpublished materials on stress and related topics, selected nine stress-reduction programs for study, and talked with personnel at various levels of the American Probation and Parole Association. Researchers also conducted telephone interviews with individuals from five of the nine programs and conducted in-person interviews at the other four.

Physical dangers of the job. Probation and parole officer work can be dangerous. According to surveys performed in four states (New York, Pennsylvania, Texas and Virginia), between 39 percent and 55 percent of officers have been victims of work-related violence or threats.² The types and levels of stress vary with the nature of the work. For example, parole officers who work in a facility or community setting may be

concerned for their own safety as well as the public's. Their work may have become even riskier because offenders on probation and parole commit more serious crimes than in the past, and more offenders have serious drug abuse histories and show less hesitation in using violence.³ However, "danger on the job" was not cited as one of the three major sources of stress.

Three major sources of stress. Officers cited high case loads as the most common stress factor, followed by an overwhelming amount of paperwork and excessive deadlines.

- High caseloads: The average supervision caseload of a probation officer is very high — 139.
- Paperwork overload: Management information systems may help to reduce the load, but officers still face an enormous amount of paperwork.
- Deadline pressure: Too many unexpected or uncontrollable deadlines create undue stress and frustration.

Other causes. Many officers cited their supervisors as a source of stress. Researchers found that 87 percent of probation officers in one survey disliked their supervisors mainly because their supervisors did not recognize their achievements or appreciate their hard work.⁴ Few advancement opportunities and low salaries were other reasons given. For example, the median salary for probation officers and correctional treatment specialists in 1999 was just over \$36,000⁵ and \$39,000 in 2004.⁶ Some officers cited low morale stemming from feelings of failure when blamed for offender misconduct and lack of public safety. Others said they got discouraged because they had limited options for imposing sanctions or offering rehabilitation to offenders.

How Do Officers Cope?

Probation and parole officers use a range of methods to relieve on-the-job stress.

Reactive methods. Some officers take extra sick leave — mental health days — simply to relieve the pressure. Others take sick leave to cope with stress-related health problems such as lower back pain or headaches. Some request transfers; others apply for early retirement.

Proactive methods. Most officers cited physical exercise as the most positive way to relieve stress. Others mentioned discussing cases with fellow officers, using religion, venting and talking to relatives.

Stress-Reduction Program

To address on-the-job stress, researchers recommend a stress-reduction program that can improve staff performance, enhance officer and public safety, and help save money. A stress-reduction program is designed to help prevent and relieve correctional officers' work-related stress. It can be structured in three basic forms:

- In-house programs, which consist of a separate unit within or operated by the correctional agency;
- External arrangements, which involve regular use of a private service provider; and
- Hybrid programs, which combine elements of both in-house and external structures.

The program can provide the following benefits:

- Reduce recruiting, screening and training costs associated with replacing employees, due to high turnover among probation and parole officers.
- Improve production by increasing morale and reducing backlogs or

stressful overload schedules of backup employees covering for co-workers on sick leave.

- Increase safety for staff and public by not being forced to delegate difficult and risky tasks of seasoned officers to rookies.

To create an effective stress-reduction program, agency administrators should consider the following when planning or expanding a program.

Select talented and dedicated staff with well-developed inter-personal skills. The quality of the staff is the backbone of the program. Administrators will need to decide whether to hire professional staff or train in-house staff. Outside professionals do not need training, but unlike in-house staff, they may not be very familiar with probation and parole issues.

Sell the program to administrators. Agency administrators must demonstrate concern for employee welfare and support the program. Involve middle managers and line supervisors who must grant permission for employee participation, which could count toward mandated training. Obtain the support of unions that could make or break a program at the management level.

Ensure confidentiality. Peer supporters and employees must establish the same confidentiality that exists between licensed mental health practitioners and clients.

Assess effectiveness. Evaluate a program to assess if it needs improvement. Evaluation should be built into program design and planning. In an outcome evaluation, the most compelling evidence is reduced stress.⁷

Provide adequate funding. Allow for one-time start-up costs. Minimize expenses by securing in-kind contributions and recruiting university professors as evaluators. Seek free resources and use any available experienced practitioners to help plan and evaluate.

Reduce organizational sources of stress. Individual agency managers should coordinate with the stress reduction program staff to identify and reduce any controllable agency-based sources of stress.

Outlook

When asked to describe his level of stress, one officer said: "Yes, I take mental health days. I use them, and I get in trouble a lot, but it's a case of self-preservation."⁸ Agencies can use a stress reduction program to help this officer and others like him. Findings from this study indicate that such programs show great promise for reducing correctional officer stress, reducing agency cost and improving public safety. Agency administrators can construct the most effective program for their agencies by tailoring various program elements to their needs.

ENDNOTES

¹ This article is based on: National Institute of Justice. 2005. *Research for practice: Stress among probation and parole officers and what can be done about it*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice. (June). Available at www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/205620.pdf.

The above research practice is based on an unpublished final report to the National Institute of Justice: Finn, P. and S. Kuck. 2003. *Addressing probation and parole officer stress*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice. Available at www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/207012.pdf.

² National Institute of Justice. 2005.

³ Faulkner, Richard (Correctional Program Specialist, National Institute of Corrections), personal communication with authors of the NIJ Research for Practice.

Brown, P.W. and M.J. Maggio. 1997. The evolution of officer safety training in the federal probation and pretrial services system. *Federal Probation*, 61(4):26-32.

⁴ Simmons, C., J.K. Cochran and W.R. Blount. 1997. Effects of job-related stress and job satisfaction on probation officers' inclinations to quit. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 21(2):213-229.

This figure is far higher than among U.S. employees in general, one-third of whom rate their boss as unfair. Source: *The Hudson Employment Index*,

1(4):2. Retrieved April 2004 from www.hudson-index.com.

⁵ This figure is comparable to firefighters' median annual salary of \$36,233. However, it is lower than the \$42,270 median annual salary of police and sheriff's patrol officers.

Figures are from: Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. 2000. *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2000-01 edition* (bulletin 2520). Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office.

⁶ Figures are from: Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Occupational outlook handbook, 2006-07 edition*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. Available at www.bls.gov/oco/ocos265.htm.

⁷ See the questionnaire used in an NIJ-sponsored survey of stress among police officers: Finn, P. and S. Kuck. 2003. Appendix F.

⁸ National Institute of Justice. 2005.

ADDITIONAL READING

Finn, P. and J. Esselman Tomz. 1997. *Developing a law enforcement stress program for officers and their families*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice. Available at www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles/163175.pdf.

Finn, P. 2000. *Addressing correctional officer stress: Programs and strategies*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice and Corrections Program Office. Available at www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/183474.pdf.