

FIGHTING STRESS IN THE LAW ENFORCEMENT COMMUNITY

BY JIM DAWSON

Be it an officer patrolling a high-crime neighborhood in a big city, a small-town cop responding to a bar fight, or a homicide detective arriving at the scene of a multiple murder, the common factor in their jobs is stress. They work in environments where bad things happen.

The same is true of corrections officers — the men and women who work in prisons, often with thousands of convicted criminals who do not want to be there. Corrections officers work in confined societies that are, by definition, dangerous. The stress levels are so high that, in one study, 27% of officers reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).¹

NIJ has a long history of supporting research related to stress for law enforcement personnel, but in 2016, NIJ's experts determined that a coordinated research agenda was needed to better respond to this long-standing issue. As a result, NIJ developed the Safety, Health, and Wellness Strategic Research Plan to describe its current and projected efforts to promote the safety, health, and wellness of individuals who work in or are affected by the criminal justice system. What is unique in the plan is that it calls for science-based tools to measure and monitor physical and mental health.²

The plan, which will continue through 2021, focuses on three populations within the criminal justice system and includes those who are employed by, under the supervision of, or interact with the system. The plan states that “the focus on stress, trauma, and suicide and self-harm prevention cuts across demographic areas highlighting the importance of promoting research of these topics within the criminal justice system.”

Early Studies

This emphasis on health and wellness builds on earlier NIJ studies, such as a 1996 project to develop a law enforcement stress program for officers and their families. That report, based on nearly 100 interviews with mental health experts, police administrators, and officers, provided “pragmatic suggestions that can help every police or sheriff’s department reduce the debilitating stress that so many officers experience.”³



A 2000 NIJ-supported project looked at the high stress among corrections officers and noted that, in addition to understaffing, overtime, shiftwork, and a poor public image, the officers faced work-related stress that included the “threat of inmate violence and actual inmate violence.” The report said that many corrections officers “do not answer their home telephones because it might be the institution calling for overtime.”⁴

In 2005, the Police Foundation focused on how shiftwork affects police officers, which continues to be a serious issue throughout law enforcement. That NIJ-supported study looked at the length of shifts, the impact of double shifts, and other factors that lead to fatigue and physical problems for law enforcement personnel.⁵

A 2012 NIJ-supported study on shiftwork and fatigue concluded that shiftwork not only increases stress but also leads to sleep problems, obesity, heart problems, sleep apnea, and an increase in the number of officers who snore. That study, by John Violanti with the School of Public Health at the State University of New York at Buffalo, also found a link between PTSD and increased rates of depression and suicide. “Mediation of brain processes due to sleep deprivation and fatigue may also impact suicidal thinking,” Violanti’s report said.⁶

Although many of these early studies were important, they were not part of a coordinated NIJ agenda to systematically study the impact of stress on health and wellness.

“So NIJ’s scientists came together in 2016 using taxonomy from the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control to articulate a health and safety strategic plan,” said William Ford, an NIJ physical scientist and senior science advisor.

The focus on using scientific tools to obtain physical markers for stress and fatigue is new to studies of law enforcement, Ford said, “and we want to create data for other research down the line. We want to translate the body of research related to stress so it is applicable to the criminal justice community.”

Overcoming the “Tough Guy” Culture

A major hurdle in working with police and corrections officers on issues of physical and mental health is the “tough guy” attitude common in law enforcement. When researchers approach officers and ask officers about alcoholism, divorce, suicide, and other problems that are widespread in law enforcement, they do not want to talk about the issues on a personal level because it could damage their careers.

That was true when the earlier studies were done and it is true today, said Brett Chapman, a social science analyst at NIJ. To overcome the resistance to programs that many in law enforcement see as indications of personal weakness, “you have to emphasize these programs in the police academy,” Chapman said.

In work that he has done with police departments, Chapman said that the more successful health and wellness programs were held at sites away from the departments “because officers are not going to go if it is at the department. If you show any indication that you’re under stress or anything like that, it could impact your career.”

When dealing with stress, officers typically say, “I’m going to control it and not let it control me,” Chapman said. “The next thing you know, divorce, alcohol use, drug use, and other problems start to occur.”

So, while officers — both men and women — are telling themselves how tough they are, their stress-related health problems inevitably begin. “Whether it’s obesity, or [a] cardio problem, or all of the other problems, they accumulate,” Chapman said. (See sidebar, “The Stress of an On-The-Job Killing.”)

NIJ’s Strategic Research Agenda

When the strategic plan was instituted in 2016, several existing NIJ research grants supported its goals, including the University of Chicago study titled *Law Enforcement Officers Safety and Wellness: A Multi-Level Study*, which is still underway. It includes a two-stage survey of more than 1,000 personnel from

law enforcement agencies to determine what is being done and what factors are at play in officer safety and wellness programs. The study addresses a wide range of stress-related topics, including violence, shiftwork, and alcohol abuse; according to the researchers, it is the first comprehensive national study of the law enforcement community. After evaluating several health and wellness programs, the researchers intend to design interventions that will provide agencies with best practices programs that can be successful.

The following are other NIJ safety and wellness grants that are part of the strategic plan:

- *The Effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Symptoms on Behavioral, Psychological, and Neurophysiological Measures of Decision Making in Police Officers*, a study by researchers at the State University of New York at Buffalo. “In spite of the repeated exposure of police officers to traumatic events and the prevalence of PTSD symptomatology among officers, there are few studies to date that have examined the effects of PTSD on both the psychological and neurophysiological basis of police decision making,” the researchers said. An earlier study by the researchers found “reduced volume” in certain brain structures as a result of PTSD, and this current study continues and expands that work.⁷
- *Neighborhoods, Stress, and Police Behavior: Understanding the Relationships*, a study by researchers at Wayne State University in Detroit. The study examines how “chronic environmental stressors” affect police patrol officers, specifically looking at the challenges that come from policing in urban neighborhoods. “Though stress clearly impacts officers, it is unclear how stress influences policing at the street level, or what role various environmental stressors play in police officer stress and performance,” the researchers said.
- *The Impact of Mindfulness-Based Resilience Training on Stress-Related Biological, Behavioral, and Health-Related Outcomes in Law Enforcement Officers*, a study by researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Acknowledging that law enforcement officers are exposed daily to “extreme levels of occupational stressors,” the researchers note that there are substantial differences in perceived stress by individual officers who are exposed to similar stressors. The researchers will study the impact of a novel training program called “mindfulness-based resilience training on perceived stress on physical and mental measurements in participants.”
- *Effects of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction in Correctional Officers: A Biopsychosocial Approach*, a study by researchers at the University of Louisville, Kentucky. Noting that corrections officers “have a higher rate of suicide than any other occupation” and that one-third meet the criteria for PTSD, the researchers will use a randomized experimental design to examine the effectiveness of mindfulness training on biological mechanisms, such as cortisol levels. “This project has the potential to identify a feasible intervention that can ameliorate the effects of stress on correctional officers’ health,” the researchers said.
- *Examining the Role of Physiological and Psychological Responses to Critical Incidents in Prisons in the Development of Mental Health Problems Among Correctional Officers*, a study by researchers at the University of Nebraska, Omaha. Noting that corrections officers experience high rates of workplace violence and rank high for nonfatal injury rates and absenteeism because of those injuries, the researchers are focusing on whether exposure to critical violent incidents contributes to negative health and occupational outcomes. The researchers are also examining whether corrections officers’ constant exposure to violence increases their vulnerability to developing PTSD.
- *Defining Impact of Stress and Traumatic Events on Corrections Officers*, a study by researchers at the Oregon Health & Science University, Portland. The researchers are conducting an 18-month observational study of about 400 corrections officers and will select the 80 most stressed and 80 least stressed officers. Those officers will undergo functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to identify alterations in neurocognitive processes affected by stress. “This project will assess and define the impact of chronic stress and

The Stress of an On-The-Job Killing

When David Klinger shot and killed the man who was trying to stab his partner to death in 1981, it was up close, but it wasn't personal. Klinger, then a patrol officer with the Los Angeles Police Department, was only 23 years old when the assailant suddenly pulled a large knife and attacked like a "madman," Klinger wrote in his 2004 book *Into the Kill Zone*.

Klinger's partner went down under the frenzied knife attack and was on his back trying to fend off the assailant's efforts to push the knife into his neck when Klinger joined the fray. As Klinger's attempts to wrestle the knife from the man failed, his partner yelled, "Shoot him!" So Klinger did. "I picked a spot on the left side of the madman's chest, brought my gun up, and pulled the trigger," Klinger wrote. The man died within minutes.

"I had gone into law enforcement to help people, not kill them," he wrote, "and the shock of having taken a life stayed with me for a long time. It was a major reason why I left police work." Klinger is now the chair of the Criminology and Criminal Justice Department at the University of Missouri and studies various aspects of policing, including the use of deadly force. In a 2002 NIJ-supported study entitled "Police Responses to Officer-Involved Shootings," he looked at the stress a police officer experiences after killing someone in the line of duty.¹

Police nationally shoot and kill about 1,000 people every year, he said in a recent interview, and he believes that number has been fairly constant for some time. What has changed is the unrelenting presence of social media and the 24-hour news cycle, he said. The 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, was "a watershed event in terms of focusing public and media attention on policing and police violence as a social problem, a social issue," he said.

Has the increased public attention increased the stress on officers working the streets? "The pressure officers feel because of social media and the 24-hour news cycle is that they never get a break," Klinger said. They don't get a break from the coverage, and they don't get a break when it comes to how an incident is handled.

Klinger isn't sure how much police behavior in the field has changed, if at all. "What we do know is we have more prosecutions. What we do know is more cops have gone to jail or prison in the last few years than in previous years. And is that because prosecutors are being more aggressive, or is it because something in the last few years is sick in American policing and we have crappy shootings that we didn't have a generation ago?" It is, he concluded, an empirical question without a definitive answer.

Note

1. David Klinger, "Police Responses to Officer-Involved Shootings," Final report to the National Institute of Justice, grant number 97-IJ-CX-0029, February 2002, NCJ 192286, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/192286.pdf>.

traumatic events on corrections officers to define the necessary urgent steps to improve officer well-being,” the researchers said.

- *Suicide Prevention and Intervention Strategies by Law Enforcement Agencies: Utilization, Characteristics, and Costs*, an in-depth and ongoing project by the RAND Corporation. Researchers surveyed law enforcement agencies both in the United States and abroad to learn about the programs and practices that agencies use to prevent suicide among their employees. The survey looked at why the programs were adopted, how they vary from agency to agency, and what resources were involved in implementing them. The data collection is complete, with 117 agencies contacted and about 150 interviews conducted. Project researchers are currently publishing the results in several journals.

The strategic plan cites a statement from the 2014 President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing that emphasizes the need for programs on officer health and wellness:⁸

The “bulletproof cop” does not exist. The officers who protect us must also be protected against incapacitating physical, mental, and emotional health problems, as well as against the hazards of their jobs. Their wellness and safety are crucial for them, their colleagues and their agencies, as well as the well-being of the communities.

Although the task force report focused on police officers and their communities, the NIJ strategic plan noted that the “sentiment of wellness within the report is equally relevant for those who work in other parts of the criminal justice system, as well as those in custody.”

“We’re talking about the employees in criminal justice, inmates, and the families of officers and of inmates,” Ford said. When a police or corrections department says they are concerned with officer safety, “we go up one level to be broader and more comprehensive. Our goal is to translate the body of research into something that is applicable to the entire criminal justice community.”

About the Author

Jim Dawson is a forensic science writer and contractor with Leidos.

Notes

1. Caterina G. Spinaris, Michael D. Denhof, and Julie A. Kellaway, *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in United States Correctional Professionals: Prevalence and Impact on Health and Functioning* (Florence, CO: Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, 2012).
2. National Institute of Justice, *Safety, Health, and Wellness Strategic Research Plan, 2016-2021* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, August 2016), NCJ 250153, <https://www.nij.gov/about/strategic-plans/Pages/safety-health-wellness-strategic-research-plan.aspx>.
3. Peter Finn and Julie Esselman Tomz, *Developing a Law Enforcement Stress Program for Officers and Their Families*, Issues and Practices in Criminal Justice (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, and Abt Associates Inc., December 1996), grant number OJP-94-C-007, NCJ 163175, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles/163175.pdf>.
4. Peter Finn, *Addressing Correctional Officer Stress: Programs and Strategies*, Issues and Practices in Criminal Justice (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, and Abt Associates Inc., December 2000), grant number OJP-94-C-007, NCJ 183474, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/183474.pdf>.
5. Karen L. Amendola et al., “The Impact of Shift Length in Policing on Performance, Health, Quality of Life, Sleep, Fatigue, and Extra-Duty Employment,” Final report to the National Institute of Justice, grant number 2005-FS-BX-0057, January 2012, NCJ 237330, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/237330.pdf>.
6. John M. Violanti, “Shifts, Extended Work Hours, and Fatigue: An Assessment of Health and Personal Risks for Police Officers,” Final report to the National Institute of Justice, grant number 2005-FS-BX-0004, March 2012, NCJ 237964, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/237964.pdf>.
7. Janet L. Shucard et al., “Symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Exposure to Traumatic Stressors Are Related to Brain Structural Volumes and Behavioral Measures of Affective Stimulus Processing in Police Officers,” *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging* 204 no. 1 (October 30, 2012): 25-31.

8. President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, *Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, May 2015), 62..
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