

Alleviating Stress In Police Agencies

Phillip Neely, Ph.D., Saint Leo University, USA
Craig S. Cleveland, Ph.D., Saint Leo University, USA

ABSTRACT

Police stress has been examined in many studies, many of which have focused upon the development of prevention and treatment programs for the police officers (Maslach, 1982; Maslach & Jackson, 1979; Mitchell, 1983; Mitchell & Everly, 1993). The trend of combating stress began with the police agencies using employee assistance programs, funding conferences, conducting research, and establishing prevention programs, but the fact remains that the health of police officers and their families becomes a large concern as most officers tend not use free counseling due to concerns regarding confidentiality and the competence of the counselors. An example of one program is the New Jersey COP-2-COP confidential hotline for police officers and their families (Ussery & Waters, 2006). COP-2-COP was a volunteer program and its usefulness was seen post-September 11, 2001, in its response to the needs of the survivors of the World Trade Center disaster and also after the New Orleans disaster in the Critical Incident Stress Debriefing process after Hurricane Katrina. Police stress can have a bad influence on police performance and can cause many problems such as poor job performance, increased accidents, sleep disturbances, marital discord, domestic violence, posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, suicide, alcohol and other drug abuse, ulcers and other digestive disorders, respiratory ailments, and cardiovascular disease.

Keywords: Law Enforcement; Police Misuse of Force; Police Stressor

INTRODUCTION

These historical theories related to the potential for conflict with police stress and police misuse of force in the community. Included are concepts of rule of law and how the concepts have affected the notions of people's civil liberties in the metropolitan Atlanta area. The changing demands in the police profession are based upon the changing political landscape as well as terrorism. A short study then demonstrates the nuances involved in implementing effective justice.

Moving into the 21st century will involve the beginning of an innovative method for the delivery of government services by which citizens make contact with public law enforcement officials by providing better customer service. The literature review includes articles that synthesize current literature on police stress and police misuse of force that will demonstrate the effects of community policing on individual freedom and civil liberties in a society.

Finally, policies were examined to see whether police stress was linked to policies and practices of local law enforcement agencies that will provide two comparative studies of policing problems in Metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia with the aim of reflecting the various problems involved in this community. The discussion of the methodology will involve surveys and interviews of law enforcement officers in metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia area in particular, there will be an evaluation of community policing within this community.

BACKGROUND

A review of the self-report method to measure police use of excessive force demonstrated a wider range of situations in which force might have been used (Junger-Tas & Marshall, 1999). The approach also overcomes some of the limitations of previous strategies in criminological reports for measuring the use of force by police in the United States (Garner et al., 2002). For example, researchers often analyzed official sources such as police records

and use-of-force complaints, which are inherently limited as they only relate to incidents that have been reported and do not represent the wider range of incidents involving excessive police force (Brandl, Strohshine, & Frank, 2001; Lersch, 1998).

Although a starting point is an evaluation of police brutality, “the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate use of force may not be analytically useful for several reasons” (Manzoni & Eisner, 2006, p. 132). First, a significant limitation of research in this area is the fact that very few police brutality cases are tried in courts or result in actual conviction (Terrill et al., 2003). Second, data such as narratives of complaints indicated that the definition of what constitutes excessive force is highly contested, fueling a polarized debate “with different participants telling different stories of the events leading to the use of force” (Manzoni & Eisner, 2006, p. 98). The debate renders it impossible to attempt to classify controversial cases of use of force on the basis of inherently incomplete information. Third, many pertinent cases are the result of a situational escalation resulting from an initial conflict that ends with the police officer using force that might be within the limits of legality and legitimacy, for example the arrest of a resisting suspect, highlighting the subjectivity of what constitutes excessive force (Terrill & Mastrofski, 2002).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between polarized psychological and criminological perspectives must be considered in future research to determine the interrelationship between both propounded theories (Friedrich, 1980). According to the psychological watchman perspective, police brutality is committed by a few rogue officers (Friedrich, 1980). “Police work is likely to attract at least some individuals who enjoy bullying others or joined the force with the intention of exploiting special opportunities to enrich themselves” (Friedrich, 1980, p. 75). While a central theory exists for explaining police brutality, which is supported in part by the factual circumstances of the case studies above, the explanation is far too dogmatic as a conclusive explanation of police brutality and ignores cogent empirical evidence to the contrary.

Alternatively, the intrinsic flaw of finding an all-encompassing theory to explain police brutality might be the fact that a police force contains many personality types (Smith, 2008). In addition to considering the interrelationship between stress strain theory and the watchman theory, consideration is given to categorizing police officer types as a starting point for the current empirical research.

Psychologists examined the psychological profiles of certain officers at risk of abuse of power in the use of excessive force and indicated the wide range of profiles discovered did not support Friedrich’s bad apple stereotype (Manzoni, 2006). Some theories point toward a personality trait that makes some officers more susceptible than others to using excessive force, which highlights the broad range of circumstances covered by the subject. In one study, police psychologists surveyed officers who had used excessive force (Williams & James, 2007). The information obtained allowed researchers to develop five types of officers, and only one of the types was similar to the bad apple stereotype. The types included personality disorders, previous traumatic job-related experience, young and inexperienced or macho officers who learn inappropriate patrol systems, and officers with personal problems. The individual behavioral and personality differences are only part of the explanation, which also includes stress. Other reasons are the structural organizational practices of the police departments in which officers work (James, 2007).

The case studies demonstrated a consistent pattern of the police culture facilitating abuses of power (Smith, 2008). The organizational practices of the Los Angeles Police Department were partly to blame in the assault on Rodney King (More, 2008). At an organizational level, the literature review demonstrated that police brutality can be attributed to behavior learned by officers due to the department’s policies (Smith, 2008).

The peer group of an officer has a direct effect on what an officer learns and how the officer will act. Young officers enter the force and experience a re-socialization process (More, 2008). Through this process, some feel their police academy experiences were only rites of passage and that the training learned there is irrelevant to learning what they need to know in action (Smith, 2008).

According to (Smith, 2008), young officers in particular often learn from senior officers and from their field training officers (Smith, 2008). This perpetuates the entrenched cyclical culture of abuse of power. Therefore, more experienced officers teach the abuse of power to younger officers (Williams & James, 2007), which further highlights the interrelationship between Friedrich's (1980) watchman theory and organizational theory facilitating such working personality tendencies in practice.

The policy for the Los Angeles Police Department officers was that they were encouraged to hit suspects with their batons if suspects resist arrest (Smith, 2008). This policy then left it up to the subjective judgment of the officer to decide what level of force is needed to arrest a suspect. Most of the tactics used by the officers beating King were deemed to involve the proper use of force techniques (Fitzgerald, 2006). Civilian overseers of the Los Angeles Police Department had changed a policy to make the baton a tactic of first resort instead of the choke hold (Smith, 2008). The way the new policy was implemented made the baton a tool of aggression instead of self-defense. Chief Gates attempted to modify the policy, but was ignored, leaving a wide gap in police use of force concerning the baton (Smith, 2008).

Organizational influences play a large role in the effective implementation of administrative policies and human resource components. According to Scrivner's (1995) five profiles, the police organization plays a key role in turning at-risk officers around or allowing them to become more deeply rooted in their bad habits. Another element that should be considered when searching for the causes of wide-ranging police brutality is the social disorganization theory. The social disorganization theory pertains to the police culture as a whole and its inability to address the excessive use of force as a crime adequately (Quinn, 2004). Prosecution of abusive officers is uncommon, because officers will not testify against other officers who they knew utilized excessive force, demonstrated by the case studies (Quinn, 2004).

METHODOLOGY

The nature of police work inherently involves high-pressure and stressful situations that will involve violent scenarios requiring the use of force in a controlled environment. While the police have strict guidelines when using force, force should nevertheless only be used proportionately to achieve a legitimate purpose (Nelson, 2001). Current research into the causality of police brutality remains inconclusive (Smith, 2008). Recent research into the causal triggers of police brutality has been shaped by polarized theories ranging from the psychological watchman theory to the criminological stress strain theory as a key contributory factor to rising police brutality.

Alternatively, some criminological models review the socioeconomic circumstances of the area in which officers operate as a central factor underpinning causality of police brutality; which is further supported by statistics demonstrating that resisting arrest and drug-fueled crime accounted for the highest proportion of police brutality incidents (Williams & James, 2007). It is apparent that there is a distinct lack of studies on the interrelationship between the psychological and criminological models (Smith, 2008). The rationale for choosing a case study tradition was presented to gain an understanding of the research method chosen and its significance in the study. One hundred and ten active police officers (55 African Americans and 55 European American) from a Metropolitan Atlanta police department were chosen to participate in the study.

Research Design and Approach

In considering a coherent and measured approach to the subject that covers a broad range of different sources relating to the topic, it was vital to adopt and implement a structured and multiple-stage strategy to produce the information needed to answer the research questions and provide a solution to the problem. This consideration was used as a starting point to formulate and develop an in-depth analysis of the complex relationship between stress and police brutality and as a basis for the empirical research. The research question and research hypothesis for the study were as follows:

RQ1: Does the perception of the standard operating procedures among African American and European officers differ among zones as it relates to excessive force?

H₀1: There is no statistically significant difference between African American and European officers’ perception of standard operating procedures and their impact on the use of excessive force.

Design of the Study

The topic required consideration of whether there is a link between stress and police brutality that covers a broad range of empirical research. The research available pointed to a link between drugs and crime (Creswell, 2003). Accordingly, the research strategy was rephrased to consider the various models propounded to explain the link between stress and police brutality. The link between the various researches was vital to evaluate and formulate ideas going forward within the debate pertaining to the link between stress and police brutality.

The use of spider diagrams to consider the relationship between the three central models pertaining to the causation of police brutality: (a) watchman theory, (b) working personality, and (c) stress strain. Mind mapping helped to develop areas of research that were followed going forward.

The research included a quantitative method. The research approach involved using a survey design method to collect data from African American and Caucasian law enforcement officers concerning job-related stressors. Following the survey design method, I collected survey data from the law enforcement officers concerning the relationship between job-related stress factors (leadership, policies and procedures, and climate) and the potential use of excessive force.

Data and Statistical Methods

Participants in the research study were current law enforcement officers within a Metropolitan Atlanta police department. A convenience sample consisted of 110 active police officers (55 African American and 55 European American) from a Metropolitan Atlanta Police Department. The law enforcement officers who participated in the research study represented various ranks from patrol officers to captains. The questionnaire was summarized using the mean, median, and standard deviation for all the variables. A small but positive correlation was identified for the independent variable of race and the participants’ cumulative score on the Police Stress Survey Form, but a positive correlation indicated a relationship existed between race and excessive force within the police department. See Table 1.

A comparison between two independent groups was done using Student’s *t* test for independent samples. The *t* test is a statistical method used to compare the mean of a sample to a known number, usually zero (Trochim, 2006). According to Trochim, participants are randomly drawn from a population and the distribution of the mean being tested is often considered the norm.

Table 1
Rank Summary of Mann-Whitney Test for Race Comparison

Factor and race	<i>N</i>	Mean rank	Sum of ranks
Impact of policy			
African American	49	63.66	3119.50
European	45	29.90	1345.50
Total	94		
Impact of leadership			
African American	49	26.44	1295.50
European	45	70.43	3169.50
Total	94		
Impact of climate			
African American	49	26.11	1279.50
European	45	70.79	3185.50
Total	94		

For the purposes of this study, the value of p was assumed to be .50 ($p = .50$). The number of test participants was used to calculate the value from the standard deviations and the correlations. Table 2 contains the summary of the response to different scale items under impact of policies and procedures. The findings showed that there is a pattern in terms of perceived association with certain aspects of policies and procedures being associated with the use of excessive force. Focusing on three key areas of disagreeable departmental regulations are related to excessive force, job conflict (by-the-book vs. by-the-situation) is related to excessive force, and problematic administrative policies and procedures are related to excessive force, the results were unexpected based on my experience in law enforcement. Officers responded on the survey with a very high agreement level for disagreeable departmental regulations; job conflict, problematic administrative policies are associated with use of excessive force.

The level of agreement was moderate or low when associating the use of excessive force with excessive paperwork, red tape in personnel complaint procedures, and directly bearing the wrath when complaints are made. The agreement was also low for overtime practices being associated with the use of excessive force. A mean score was used to measure central tendency by calculating the sum of all scores and dividing by the total number of scores. I analyzed the scores for the composite and five subcategories of the Police Stress Survey Form and then calculated the associated mean scores.

The cumulative mean score in this study was 1.7872. The standard deviation of scores is the average deviation from the mean. The standard deviation describes how a set of scores relates to the mean of a sample and represents a finding that is more precise than that found with a range of scores. The standard deviation for the cumulative score of disagreeable departmental regulation was .41146. The means and standard deviations of the cumulative and subtest scores are shown in Table 2.

The summary of the response to different scale items under impact of leadership style found that inadequate support by supervisor had a response of *agree* by 91.5% of police officers sampled. A similar high agreement percentage response was found for inadequate support affecting the excessive use of force. However, the responses provided were indifferent on an average for difficulty in getting along with the supervisor is affecting the use of excessive force. A very high level of agreement (97.8%) was found for inadequate supervision related to use of excessive force. Similarly, very high agreement was also seen for use of excessive force related to being held accountable for bad decisions and self-centred and self-serving leadership. This is reflected in the mean scores (of agreement) reported in Table 2.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics Summary for All Statements

Statement	Mean		SD
	Statistic	Std. error	
Disagreeable departmental regulations are related to excessive force	1.7872	.04244	.41146
Job conflict (by-the-book vs. by-the-situation) is related to excessive force	1.8936	.03537	.34292
Problematic administrative policies and procedures are related to excessive force	1.4787	.05180	.50223

Table 3 gives the response summary in terms of mean and standard deviation for different zones. In a descriptive sense, there did not appear to be much difference in the response for different zones. A similar pattern was found for age groups and number of years in service.

Table 3
Response to Impact of Leadership

Statement	SA		A		D		SD		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	N	%
Inadequate support by supervisor is related to excessive force (Question 13)	6	6.4	86	91.5	2	2.1	0	0.0	94	100
Inadequate support by department are related to excessive force (Question 14)	8	8.5	85	90.4	1	1.1	0	0.0	94	100
Excessive or inappropriate discipline is related to excessive force (Question 17)	10	10.6	41	43.6	39	41.5	4	4.3	94	100
Being held accountable for bad decisions made under pressure are related to excessive force (Question 19)	13	13.8	80	85.1	1	1.1	0	0.0	94	100

Note. SA = strongly agree, A = agree, D = disagree, and SD = strongly disagree.

CONCLUSION

A tension does exist between the police and ethnic suspects. The pressure from the rioting and terrorist stereotypes has caused a lot stress for the police and a number of investigators have suggested the routine administrative, bureaucratic, and organizational aspects of police work are at least as stressful as the inherent dangers of police work. Most of these stress factors have been identified as responses were courts, administrative policies and lack of support, inadequate equipment, community relations, and changing work shifts, and crisis situations. Furthermore, the ethnic variations in the perception and treatment of violence found in the study were complex. There is certainly more than an ounce of truth in the way in which most Black and Asian minorities are identified. The police are more likely to search such people, particularly African Caribbean arrestees. Overall, there was more of a fear of security than a fear of racism prevalent in the people interviewed.

Police stress can have a bad influence on police performance and can cause many problems such as poor job performance, increased accidents, sleep disturbances, marital discord, domestic violence, posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, suicide, alcohol and other drug abuse, ulcers and other digestive disorders, respiratory ailments, and cardiovascular disease (North, A 1999). Law enforcement is an occupation at risk for environmental, cultural, and personal factors and Waters, Irons, and Finkle (1992) even identified a scale that shows which major stressors in police work and in officers' private lives were most troubling to officers.

The literature identifies many types of stress (Waters, L, 1982). Stress can come from explosive events (e.g., the events that occurred on September 11, 2001, and natural disasters) that led to public depression and can cause long-term consequences if not handled properly. Implosive events may include internal conflicts and feelings of inadequacy. Daily tensions associated with police work contribute to such feelings. Studies have reported domestic violence and high levels of alcohol abuse by police officers due to such stress factors.

Several recommendations can be made to allow for the treatment of such problems. One of the remedies has been to promote a strong support system for police officers, which can be done through peer-support programs that are effective in terms of addressing many types of mental health problems.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Dr. Phillip Neely is the recipient of the Doctor of Philosophy in Public Policy and Administration from Walden University and the Masters of Science in Public Administration from Central Michigan University. He is an adjunct Professor at Saint Leo University in Duluth, Georgia. Dr. Neely's expertise comes in the field of criminal justice and public policy. E-mail: phillip.neely@saintleo.edu (Corresponding author)

Dr. Craig S. Cleveland is the recipient of the Doctor of Business Administration degree in Management from Argosy University and the Masters of Business Administration degree from Shorter University He is an Assistant Professor of Business at Saint Leo University in Duluth, Georgia. Dr. Cleveland's expertise comes in the field of management, leadership, criminal justice, and public administration. E-mail: craig.cleveland@saintleo.edu

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