43660

Job Stress in Law Enforcement: A Treatment and Prevention Program *

Michael D. Roberts
Director of Psychological Services
San Jose Police Department

The Psychological Services Unit of the San Jose Police Department began in 1971 (Roberts, 1972). The original goal of the program was to: psychologically screen entry-level recruits; develop and implement a field training and evaluation program for new officers; and to provide a free, voluntary and confidential psychotherapy service for all sworn officers and their families. Although the size and scope of the program was increased significantly over the past four years, these basic services are still the core of the unit's function.

The integration of these services into one unit has provided a unique perspective of job stress in law enforcement work. From a pool of thousands of applicants, several hundred recruits have been psychologically evaluated and recommended for employment. After a standard Academy experience, each individual's performance is monitored as they go through one of the most sophisticated field training and evaluation programs in the country (Roberts & Allen, 1973). The surviving officers (75%) are re-evaluated after their first year on the streets, and again, prior to any special unit assignment (e.g., SWAT, Bomb Squad). At various points in this sequence a significant number of officers have utilized the thearpy service, which has added another dimension to the understanding of how individual officers react to stressful events on the job.

In addition to this longitudinal assessment of the effects of job stress, the therapy service has provided a very comprehensive cross-sectional view of the problem. Since 1971 over 30% of the department's sworn officers have voluntarily engaged in psychotherapy and every unit and rank in the agency has been represented.

The Sources of Job Stress in Law Enforcement Work

Some research has been conducted in this area (see papers by Eisenberg and Hurrell and Kroes in this volume), and an extensive national survey is currently underway by NIOSH and the Police Foundation. This author's experiences tend to concur with the existing research conclusions that stress may be traced to contributory factors: (1) outside the police organization, e.g., hostile media, politicians, and citizenry; (2) within the police organization, e.g., poor supervision, lack of career development opportunities, offensive policies; (3) within the criminal justice system, e.g., the interference and leniency of the courts, the failure of correctional and referral subsystems; (4) within the individual officer, e.g., the skill deficient, the anxious and/or fearful, the immature, the impulsive; and (5) from the interaction of these factors.

The Effects of Job Stress on Law Enforcement Officers

The existing medical strain (symptom) research on law enforcement officers indicates clearly that they are more likely to develop and/or die from circulatory and digestive disorders than those in most other occupational groups (Guralnick, 1963; Richard & Fell, 1975).

*Editors note: Potentially offensive expressions have been retained in this article in the interest of presenting an accurate report of actual police situations.

These strain reactions have an early onset, as in evident in the cross-sectional research done on Los Angeles County Deputy Sheriffs (Pitchess, 1973).

Although research on the emotional strains associated with police work is just beginning, we do know that suicide is a major cause of death of police officers (Guralnick, 1963, Richard & Fell, 1974). In fact, recent reports indicate officers are six-and-one-half times more likely to commit suicide than non-law enforcement citizens (Friedman, 1967).

The same isolation, despair and loss of purpose that is involved in suicide seems to account for some officer's failing marriages, and their often desperate reliance upon the supportive aspects of the "police culture." In agencies which have examined the failure rates of police marriages (Seattle, Los Angeles, San Jose, Montreal) the data often indicate as high or higher rates than exist in the population the agency serves. In any event, the rates are surprisingly high in view of the relatively conservative and conventional value structure of most officers. Whatever the reason for the frequent failure of police marriges, it is evident that most officers view their work as a major cause of the problem (Kroes & Margolis,1974).

The daily business of internal Affairs Divisions (IAD) provides another view of the effects of job stress (Hillgren, 1974). Many of the officers who come to the attention of IAD are exhibiting poor coping reactions that require the attention of a therapist, as well as departmental discipline.

The most direct reflection of emotional strain due to police work is in the experience of the psychotherapist who work with police agencies. The previously mentioned 30% utilization rate in San Jose is solid evidence that many officers experience emotional strain. Further, 10% of these clients are troubled enough to require temporary re-assignment out of the field because they pose a threat to themselves, other officers, or the citizens. It is notable that almost every re-assignment has been agreed to by the officer.

The generality of these strains in law enforcement work is evident in the fact that many police agencies are trying to develop in-house therapy services, usually at the joint request of the employee's union and the agency head.

Recognizing that many of the identified stressors are either basic to law enforcement work, or in a practical sense unchangeable in the near future, the most pragmatic solution seems to be "weeding out" those who are least likely to adapt successfully, and assisting the remainder to develop more comfortable coping methods.

Stress Prevention By "Deselection"

Contrary to some recent court decisions, not everyone is either capable, or even trainable, as a police officer. As Eisenberg (1975) has noted, the officer who is incompetent intellectually, physically or emotionally, is under severe stress in this often demanding occupation.

Recently, many entry-level selection standards have been lowered because of the relatively high failure rates of "protected classes" on these tests, together with the unconvincing validity data used to support the existing cut-off points. This lack of significance of existing validity data has often been used to justify removing, or severely lowering, existing standards. A

more appropriate conclusion, however, would be that while existing criteria are perhaps too stringent, some minimum standard is almost certainly necessary. Any order to change a standard should be accompanied by an evaluation program designed to determine the minimum performance on that standard which is likely to be associated with acceptable performance on the job. To reiterate: a change in standards should be regarded as an experiment, not a new definition of reality.

The Psychological Services Unit has been conducting a two stage validation program since 1972. The first stage involves the validation of many pre-employment selection standards against field performance during the Field Training and Evaluation Program (FT & EP). The performance criteria are daily ratings on 31 job task elements by Field Training Officers (FTO's) during the new officer's first three months of street work. This intensive scrutiny of actual job performance is assumed to be a good predictor of what the same officer's eventual performance would be like. In view of the very high human and economic risks involved if selection mistakes are made, such an assumption seem justified.

The second stage is the validation of most pre-employment selection standards, and post-employment FT & EP standards, against many out-put criteria reflecting work quantity and quality after several years of employment. These include: departmental disciplinary actions; citizens complaining; vehicle accident involvement; frequency and type of felony arrests, and their disposition at the district attorney and court levels; and "resisting" and "assualting an officer" arrests, analyzed as a function of beat, shift, officer productivity, and suspect characteristics.

On the basis of validity data from the project's first stage a number of pre-employment tests criteria have been identified as predictive of successful performance during the FT & EP. Some of these criteria, specially indices of cognitive skill and emotional stability are now being used to avoid hiring individuals who because of their own characteristics, would be particularly vulnerable to job stress in police work.

One spinoff of the validation program described has been the identification of a pass-point on the entry-level written examination (CPS 51X) associated with satisfactory performance on such frequent police tasks as report writing, use of the police radio, and use of the beat map. By raising the recently lowered written pass-point, there is some assurance that new officers will have sufficient cognitive skill to learn these routine job tasks without becoming overwhelmed by "evaluation anxiety," and thus have other areas of their performance deteriorate.

Pre-Employment Psychological Screening

Although most police agencies utilize some form of psychological screening (Grencik, J. M., et al. 1973), the mental health experts they hire are almost always external to the agency. This "outsider" status has been praised as a guarantee of objectivity, but in actual fact is more often a guarantee that the professional's contribution is of little value. Ignorant of the psychological demands of street police work, and insulated from even subjective feedback about their selection mistakes, the "expert's" recommendation relies upon the inappropriately lax standards of emotional stability derived from experience with the general public.

Psychological Services Unit uses a multimethod assessment format which reflects the cautiousness derived from living with selection errors; the need to judge in the absences of completely satisfactory validity data; and the Chief's concern about moral and legal responsibility in view of the "negligent admission," and "negligent retention" concepts (Schmidt, W., 1973).

This format includes the use of a test battery,* a group stress interview, a personal interview, and examination of the background investigation.

Some scales of the MMPI, and the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, have been particularly worthwhile in the selection process. There is a strong statistical relationship between indices of anxiety and poor field performance - particularly stress-related behavior like "control of conflict," "driving under stress conditions," and "officer safety." In addition, these measures of generalized anxiety seem able to identify recruits whose behavior becomes non-productive under evaluation conditions. Eventually some of these tests may be used to eliminate applicants on an actuarial basis, but only if the current replication and cross validation efforts are successful.

The group stress interview is a modification of the situational assessment technique used by Mills (1972). In the San Jose model a psychologist and at least two experienced officers who have been trained as raters and role players evaluate five applicants during a four hour session. The interviewers engage the applicants in a "no B.S." discussion of their perception of police work, then flow into police-related situational role playing, and end with a peer evaluation process. The applicants are always given the police officer role, and they are exposed to several standardized confrontation situations (e.g., uncooperative burglary suspect; man-with-a-gun; family fight). The raters look for poise, well modulated control tactics, and ability to think clearly under stress conditions.

Line officers are used as raters because of their first-hand exposure to recruits who have evolved into good officers, or poor ones. The success of the peer rating technique in selection research would seem to justify this approach. An unanticipated benefit of the use of line officers in this phase of psychological screening is the resulting respect within the department for the entire process.

The personal interview is used to consolidate the information from each assessment method, compare it to the applicant's prior behavior, and arrive at a recommendation. The recommendation, then, is a product of the clinical distillation of past behavior (background), statistically probable future behavior as a police officer (tests), and subjective impressions from current behavior (personal and stress interviews).

---

*Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI); California Personality Inventory; Spielberger's State-Trait Anxiety Inventory; Shutz's FIRO-B and FIRO-F; Rotter's Internal-External Control Scale; Interpersonal Trust Scale, Incomplete Sentences Blank; and the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale.

When the confounding variable of deficient cognitive skill has been ruled out by a sufficiently demanding written examination, about 15% of the remaining candidates are dropped by the psychologist. This selection ratio, and the psychological characteristics of the "suitable" applicant, is essentially the same for minorities and females.

Post-Employment Probationary Selection

Confronted by the failure of the educational system to guarantee even minimal reading and writing skills in its high school and college graduates, together with the "non-selection" that results from many "non-discriminatory" entry standards, the law enforcement employer has come to rely upon the evaluation of academy and field performance as the heart of the selection system.

The Academy

Law enforcement agencies that have used the probationary period as part of the selection process have almost universally expected the police academy to eliminate unsuitable recruits. Unfortunately, in many agencies the same educational system that graduates functional illiterates after 12 to 14 years, is expected to produce officers with all the requisite skills in only three months.

Even if this dilemma is resolved (and it must be), another problem for academy "selection" seems inevitable. It is likely that if adverse impact occurs during academy training, the courts will agree with apellants that "academy performance is not job performance." It would be wise to anticipate such an outcome, and utilize the academy to document and eliminate only those who are deficient in: (1) learning skills, and (2) motivation - both as reflected in significant substandard performance on objective written and work sample tests.

To the extent that academy standards are comparable with work demands, the "buck is passes" to the angency itself.

Field Training and Evaluation Program

The role of the "training officer" in police work is as old as the profession itself. Although the idea is good, the reality is usually discouraging - particularly to the recruit officer. The cause of this state of affairs can be traced to: (1) the reluctance of police administrators to place the authority for evaluation and termination at the rank level that is given the responsibility for the task; (2) the random assignment of recruits to senior officers who are not necessarily skilled at teaching or evaluating; and (3) the protective aspects of the police culture that render official performance evaluation meaningless.

The San Jose Police Department FT & EP has resolved these basic issues, and advanced a number of innovations to the field. The structural characteristics of this program reflect the overall objective of producing an officer who can assume solo beat responsibility in a technically and humanely proficient fashion after twelve weeks. This objective necessarily avoids training and evaluation criteria expected of the seasoned officer. A job task analysis was conducted by examining narrative comments made about recruit

officers by FTO's and FTO sergeants. This analysis led to a list of job task elements to be evaluated, and a series of teaching blocks patterned after the task hierarchy.

The Psychological Services Unit provides consultation to the FT & EP staff, particularly during the bi-monthly evaluation sessions when the recruits' progress is examined by the entire team, and remedial training is prescribed for those who need it.

The program has a three year history, and during that period about 25% of all recruits resigned in lieu of termination, or were terminated.

Stress Reduction Through Inoculation

Confronted by the anguished pain and defeat of some citizens, frightened by the violence and hostility of others, the new police officer can soon become defensively alienated from emotional contact with other humans. After the first few years of street work some officers come to view the world as composed of two classes of people: cops and "assholes." The officer's attempts to share his experiences with his wife and civilian friends are all too often rejected. As the pressure and loneliness mount, he turns to the venerable analgesic found in every policeman's bar in the country: alcohol mixed liberally with war stories. Only in the company of other officers can he openly discuss the fear he felt, or the violence he exhibited (or wanted to). But, even here, the desired contact is brief, and far too shallow to give any lasting satisfaction. Nevertheless, some kind of contact is better than none, so the event becomes an institution.

Wambaugh's The Choir Boys is a dramatic illustration that the single common denominator uniting otherwise very different human beings is the depth of this simultaneous dread-desire for human closeness. The personal, marital, and career damage done by this coping style is enormous.

In an attempt to minimize reliance on this coping mechanism, the Psychological Services Unit provides a block of training on the effects of job stress in the Basic Academy, Advanced Officer Training, Field Training Officer Seminar, and Supervisory Training. The early warning signs of physical and emotional response to stress are presented at each of these stages, along with a discussion of various alternative responses (psycho-therapy, outside interests, improved personal contacts, aerobic exercise, meditation, biofeedback).

During recent Academy sessions the officer's mates have been invited, and a panel of older officers (sometimes wives) discuss these issues from a very personal perspective.

The Treatment of Job Stress: Psychotherapy

The responsibility for a successful outcome in psychotherapy rests in large part on the psychological reserves and motivation of the client. In this context, officer-clients are relatively easy to work with because they have a strong aversion to being "screwed up," and no matter how serious the emotional disruption, they usually have a history of life success behind them.

The average officer enters therapy because he cannot deal with his wife and/or girlfriends. In many cases one partner's mind is made up, and the therapy becomes "divorce counseling;" focusing on the rejected person's need for self-esteem, and the departing person's guilt feelings for hurting their mate and children.

These marital problems are due in part to job stress: the defensive alienation from close emotional ties, the secondary status of wife and family, and the lack of diversity in outside friendships. In addition, many common cultural stresses are also at play: the changing roles of women, the disparity between the men and women's educational experience and level of sophistication, and the re-definition of the marriage relationship into an egalitarian partnership.

Other problems commonly dealt with in therapy are the officer who is hyperaggressive on the street; the temporary emotional disruption that follows many police killings; the conflict with superiors that affects every rank; and various motivational problems, from the "workaholic" to the "deadwood."

References

Friedman, P. "Suicide Among Police", In Schneidrean, E. (Ed.). Essays in Self-Destruction. New York: Science House, 1967.

Grencik, J. M. In Pitchess, Peter J. The Physiological Fitness of Deputies Assigned to the Patrol Function and Its Relationship to the Formulation of Entrance Standards for Law Enforcement Officers. Law Enforcement Assistance Administration Grant, Final Report. June, 1973.

Guralnick, L. Mortality by occupation and cause of death among men 20-64 years of age, United States 1950, Vital Statistics--Special Reports, 1963, 53.

Hillgren, James. A Stress Management Model for Law Enforcement. Unpublished symposium presentation, American Psychological Association Convention, September, 1974.

Mills, Robert D. New Directions in Police Selection - Profile of the U.S. Police Officer. Unpublished symposium presentation, Annual Convention of American Psychological Association, Honolulu, Hawaii, September, 1972.

Pitchess, Peter J. The Physiological Fitness of Deputies Assigned to the Patrol Function and its Relationship to the Formulation of Entrance Standards for Law Enforcement Officers. Law Enforcement Assistance Administration Grant, Final Report. June, 1973.

Richard, Wayne C. and Feld, Ronald D. Health Factors in Police Job Stress. Unpublished symposium presentation, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Cincinnati, Ohio, May, 1975.

Roberts, Michael D. The delivery of psychological services to police agencies: The San Jose Police Department Psychological Services Program. Unpublished symposium presentation, Western Psychological Association, 1972.

Roberts, Michael D. and Allen, Robert. The San Jose Police Department Field Training Officer Program: A Model of Police Selection Integrating Training and Evaluation. Unpublished program description, International Association of Chiefs of Police - American Express Award for significant contribution to police science and technology, 1973.

Schmidt, W. W. Administrator's Liability for Negligent Employment of Police Officers. AELE Law Enforcement Legal Defense Center Brief 73-6, 3-23.

238-571 O - 77 - 16

END