Stress in police officers: a study of the origins, prevalence and severity of stress related symptoms within a county police force

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ABSTRACT

Background: High levels of stress related illness are causing concern across industry. Against a background of impending legislative moves to try to improve this situation, there is a need to identify key work related stressors. Police work tends to be regarded as inherently stressful because of the personal risk of exposure to confrontation and violence and the day-to-day involvement in a variety of traumatic incidents. As a result, high levels of stress related symptoms might be expected.

Objective: To examine the sources of stress related symptoms within police officers and measure the prevalence of significant associated mental ill health.

Method: A cross sectional questionnaire survey of a population of 1,206 police officers was performed to assess levels of strain associated with a series of potential home and work related stressors. Participants were then split into low and high scoring groups on the basis of a GHQ threshold score in order to identify those stressors most associated with mental ill health effects.

Results: Occupational stressors ranking most highly within the population were not specific to policing but to organisational issues such as the demands of work impinging upon home life, lack of consultation and communication, lack of control over workload, inadequate support and excess workload in general.

The high scoring group constituted 41 % of the population and differed significantly from those with low scores in perception of all stressors, ranking both personal and occupational stressors more highly and from personality constraints appeared significantly more ‘stress-prone’. A significant association between gender and mental ill health was found, with females more likely to carry a high score than males.

Conclusion: This study confirms previous findings of organisational culture and workload as the key issues in officer stress. Given that the degree of symptomatology appears to be worsening and the apparent character predisposition to mental ill health,
action is required. Further research is indicated within the police population into a possible increased susceptibility in female officers.

**Key words:** Occupation; police; stress; workload; shifts; mental health; gender.