

## THE EXPERIENCE OF STRESS FOR CORRECTION OFFICERS: A DOUBLE-BIND THEORY OF CORRECTIONAL STRESS

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### ABSTRACT

*This study investigated the experience of stress for 143 mostly male New Jersey correction officers, including officers from both state and county, of all ranks, and with varying lengths of service. Each filled in a questionnaire eliciting information regarding perceptions of stress in themselves and others, situational and temporal experience of correctional stress, consequences in terms of physical health, emotional and interpersonal relations, and job performance, perceptions of sources of correctional stress, and coping techniques utilized. While objective indicators such as physical illnesses and high divorce rates suggested that the job was indeed a stressful one, the correction officers presented a tough, "macho" image, denying their stress and its consequences, although they were more willing to report stress-related problems in their fellow workers. While they identified officer-inmate interaction as their major situation of stress, they attributed their problems in this area to administrative malfunctions which place them in a classic double-bind predicament in relation to rule enforcement. Their powerlessness in this situation is rendered especially stressful by the macho working personality which the job requires of them.*

The current crisis situation in corrections has precipitated a serious concern with the stressfulness of the job of the correction officer. Severe overcrowding of prison facilities as a result of longer prison terms, plus the presence of more violent offenders and many mentally ill inmates, often undiagnosed and untreated, has placed heavy pressures upon the officer. Resulting officer stress and burn-out has led to soaring organizational costs due to high rates of absenteeism and turnover. Moreover, im-

paired job performance in terms of passivity, disinterest, negativity, and displaced hostility has threatened custodial control, with increasing frequency of violent incidents. Thus, a strong interest in examining officer stress, its nature, causes, and consequences and how it may be relieved has developed.

Until now little attention has been paid to the stressfulness of this demanding role; professional publications and research activities have focused primarily upon the

stress of the correction officers' more glamorous colleagues in law enforcement, police officers. Many studies have identified police work as a highly stressful occupation, revealing high rates of suicide attempts, heart disease, circulatory and digestive problems, drug addiction, and alcoholism, which have sometimes resulted in premature death (Kroes and Hurrell, 1975; Kirkham, 1976). Although earlier studies may have suffered from inadequate comparisons with job stress in other occupations, Kelling and his associates conducted in 1977 a national survey of job stress for police officers in which comparison with studies of other workers was made. This survey confirmed previous observations of higher rates of illnesses, somatic complaints, and divorce in police officers (Kelling and Pate, 1977).

Though in-depth research findings have not been available, many observations have suggested that stress for correction officers is similarly high, or indeed perhaps higher than that for police officers. Of several states surveyed in the mid 70s, the rate of heart attacks among correctional personnel was one of the highest among the various groups of state employees (Wynne, 1977). Time off for disability by the New York State Correctional Staff was 300 percent higher than the state average, while problems of severe emotional stress involving the heart, alcoholism, and allied emotional disorders accounted for 60 percent of the disability leave (New York State, 1975).

On the surface of it, the exceptional stress of law enforcement personnel in general might be attributed to unique attributes of their roles. For instance, being a police officer sets a person apart from the rest of the community and makes him or her subject to the prejudice, fear, and sometimes open hostility of a large segment of society. In the case of the correction officer, everyday activities subject him to even greater hostility and disrespect in a situation of isolation and confinement.

However, studies attempting to discover the causes of the special stress experienced by police officers have come up with quite

different findings which interestingly conform to those of many studies of occupational stress in general (Kahn et al., 1964). For instance, Margolis, Kroes, and Quinn (1974) examining sources of stress in a number of occupations, including police officers, found across all occupations, non-participation in decisions affecting the worker to be the most salient source of stress and this was highly correlated with low self-esteem. In a later survey examining stress in police work specifically, Kroes, Margolis, and Hurrell (1974) found that it was not the life-threatening aspect of police work, but rather the continuous assault on the officers' self-esteem which provided most stress. The more recent study of Kelling and Pate (1977) confirmed these findings of low self-esteem in police personnel. Finally, Aldag and Brief (1978) have found police role stress to be related to role ambiguity and role conflict, once again administrative rather than job-related sources.

In the area of corrections, few studies have examined the experience of stress for the officer. Brodsky (1977) has pointed out the stressful impact of the organizational characteristics associated with a captive clientele, first described by Sykes (1958), and outlines a long-term stress process to which correction officers are vulnerable. Lombardo (1979) conducted interviews with a randomly selected group of 50 correction officers, identifying three general areas of stress for correction officers: inmates, powerlessness, and poor communication.

Cressey (1959), in a comparative study of custody-oriented and treatment-oriented prisons, noted that the inherent stressfulness of correctional facilities was due to the presence of contradictory directives resulting in role conflict and was existent in each type of institution. The stressful impact of the inherent conflicting organizational goals of custody versus treatment has been noted by several investigators. In a longitudinal case study Grusky (1959) found that adherence to custodial goals fostered a situation in which organizational needs took priority over those of the individual. Pogrebin (1978) has also described the negative con-

sequences of this kind of role conflict in a treatment setting.

A more in-depth study of the impact of role strain on the correction officer as a result of the treatment-custody dichotomy was undertaken by Priestley (1972). His study of British custodial officers showed how role expectations resulted in behavior patterns which followed the social deviance typology of ritualism, conformity, innovation, and retreatism developed by Merton (1957).

Poole and Regoli (1980), also looking at the impact of stress, noted that officers tend to respond to very stressful situations through an intensified commitment to the custodial role. This unfortunately may serve to perpetuate a vicious cycle of hostile and stressful interaction, for Johnson (1977) has pointed out that by counterbalancing his custodial role with a treatment or helping role, the officer may be helpful in the amelioration of prison stress.

The present study of stress for correction officers grew out of a perceived need for information in this area in connection with a special course in "Stress Awareness and Coping Techniques," which was being developed in 1977 by the authors at the New Jersey Correction Officers Training Academy (Cheek and Miller, in press). To obtain this information, a pilot study surveyed 24 county correction officers in training at the Academy in order to examine their experience of stress in terms of perceptions of its presence, nature, causes, and consequences, as well as coping techniques used. The findings, while preliminary, supported those in the area of stress for police officers as well as previous research by the senior author (Cheek et al., 1967) in the area of tension. Major perceived areas of stress were lack of clearly defined job descriptions, inadequate equipment, and lack of training. Thus, as with police officers, the most important sources of stress appeared to lie in administrative aspects of the job rather than in anything inherent in the role itself, such as inmate-officer relations and/or the threat of physical harm.

In view of the paucity of systematic re-

search data in this area and also because of the suggestiveness of the preliminary findings, it was decided to examine further in the present study, which took place in 1978, the experience of stress for correction officers, its nature and consequences, on a larger and more varied sample. For comparison purposes, both state and county officers were studied, as well as officers less than, and more than, two years in the service. Also, officers below the rank of sergeant and above were included. The study looked at officer perceptions of stress, characteristics of and situational aspects in their experience of stress, consequences in terms of physical and emotional status, perceived causes of stress, and coping techniques.

## METHODS

The officers who participated in the study were students in the regular ongoing programs of the New Jersey Correction Officers Training Academy from mid-December, 1978 through June 1979 (1 State Basic class, 2 County Basic classes, 1 State and County Advanced class, and 8 specialized classes).

The questionnaire was self-administered in supervised group sessions. Respondents were motivated by being told that they would be participating in a pioneering effort, and that the information was needed to structure better the Academy's Stress Management programs. Candidness and anonymity were stressed. The questionnaire required from 55 minutes to one hour and 45 minutes to complete; the average time spent was approximately one and a half hours. No class member refused to participate.

Two hundred and four correctional personnel from 12 classes filled in the questionnaire. Twenty-seven questionnaires were discarded because the respondents were not officers but other staff correctional persons, and 15 were rejected for incomplete information. The total sample was 143. Originally, for comparison purposes, it was hoped to represent equally in the sample state and county officers, officers above and

TABLE 1  
DEMOGRAPHIC AND JOB CHARACTERISTICS OF  
THE SAMPLE\* (N=143)

<i>Demographic</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Sex</i>		
Male	121	87
Female	22	13
<i>Race</i>		
White	112	78
Black	28	20
Hispanic	3	2
<i>Age</i>		
19-30	58	41
31-40	38	27
41-50	27	19
50+	20	14
<i>Marital Status</i>		
Never Married	38	27
Married, Never Divorced	72	50
Remarried	17	12
Divorced	10	7
Separated	6	4
<i>Education</i>		
High School or Cert.	50	35
Some College or Tech. School	83	58
Coll. Degree and/or Other Graduate Work	10	7
<i>Job Data</i>		
<i>Affiliation</i>		
State	65	45
County	78	55
<i>Length of Service in Corrections</i>		
Less than 2 years	50	35
More than 2 years	93	65
<i>Rank</i>		
Less than Sergeant	100	70
Sergeant or Higher	43	30

\*Complete data were obtained for each variable, so in each case the total is 143 or 100 percent.

below the rank of sergeant and officers more and less than two years in corrections. As Table 1 shows, this goal was not completely achieved. Table 1 also shows the demographic characteristics of the group.

The questionnaire was primarily an elaboration of an instrument developed (Cheek et al., 1967) for a study of the experience of tension in alcoholics. A literature search on stress in police officers, plus discussions with correctional colleagues, yielded further items. Finally, the several items from the questionnaire used by Kelling and his associates (Kelling and Pate, 1977), in their studies of police officer stress were replicated so that comparable data could be obtained.<sup>1</sup>

The questionnaire consisted of 31 pages with eight sections as follows:

1. demographic data: age, sex, etc.
2. occupational data: institutional data, employment history, attitudes towards job, etc.
3. physical health: physical symptoms and illnesses experienced on and off duty; use of medication, alcohol, cigarettes, etc.; perceived illnesses in colleagues at work, etc.
4. perceptions of stress: perception of degree of stress in self and others, perception of negative effects of stress on physical and emotional health, etc.
5. the experience of stress: amount of stress experienced with various categories of individuals (inmates, supervisors, etc.), amount of stress experienced in various places in the correctional facility, amount of stress experienced in various situations (escape, meal breaks, etc.), degree of liking and disliking various situations, amount of stress at various times of day, physical concomitants of stress, emotional concomitants of stress, behavioral concomitants of stress
6. the consequences of stress: physical and emotional health problems, interpersonal problems, common distress reactions to stress at four levels in terms of severity

7. the causes of stress: shift work, lack of training, getting conflicting orders, etc.
8. techniques of coping with stress: extent to which subject already had explored techniques of coping with stress; ways of coping with stress such as calisthenics, sex, cursing, etc.; perceptions of the importance of learning how to cope with stress

For some questions, respondents were asked to use a five- or six-point rating scale. For instance, they were asked to indicate to what extent they felt crisis situations were likely to contribute to stress on their jobs on a six-point scale from "very unlikely" to "very likely."

For each item frequency counts were obtained. Percentage and/or average ratings were calculated. Correlation analyses were used to explore the relationship among the other variables and with state and county affiliation, length of service, and officer rank.

As noted above, for comparability, both state and county officers were studied, as well as officers with less than and more than two years in the service, and officers above and below the rank of sergeant. Some differences with regard to these groupings appeared when examined systematically with correlational analyses; however, considerations of space make it impossible to report upon this wealth of observations in one article. This article will therefore focus upon the stress experience of the group of officers as a whole, comparing them, where possible, with the police officers studied earlier by Kelling and Pate (1977).

It should also be noted that the present study, which was conducted in 1978, predated the present crisis brought about by overcrowding of correctional facilities. However, more recent studies (Cheek and Miller, 1982) and monitoring activities in connection with stress training courses (Cheek and Miller, in press) suggest that the data presented here are representative of the basic experience of stress of the officer, and that later events have only served to exacerbate the situation.

## RESULTS

Studies of police officers (Wilson, 1971; Skolnick, 1966) have reported them to be impassive, tough men, who deny their feelings and weaknesses. Such a picture also emerged in the present study as the correction officers denied their stress and the problems it caused them, though objective indices of physical and marital problems told a different story.

### *Perceptions of Stress*

For instance, questioned regarding their own general level of stress and tension, the officers did not report themselves to be particularly tense or stressed (see Table 2). However, they did see their fellow officers as more stressed than themselves, and corrections as moderately more stressful than other occupations. This kind of denial of their job stress has been noted by correction officer stress trainers (Kopp, 1982). Dr. Jack McCall, director of North Carolina prison psychological services (quoted in Wilson, 1977) also comments that officers do not admit their stress, but exhibit what he calls a "John Wayne" syndrome.

### *Perceptions of Consequences of Stress on Various Areas*

Denial was also manifested in the officers' perceptions of consequences of their job stress. The officers reported that their emotional state was most likely to suffer from job stress, and then physical health, family relations, and job performance in that order. However, none of these negative effects was seen as being very likely to occur (see Table 2). On the other hand, their perceptions of the effects of negative job stress on their brother officers in these areas was higher and, indeed, similar to the reports of police officers in this regard.

Thus, the correction officers were asked to report how many of the five people in the department with whom they worked most closely had had serious problems with alcohol, marriage, children, health, finances,

TABLE 2  
OFFICERS' PERCEPTIONS OF STRESS (N=143)

<i>Perceptions of Stress in Self and Others</i>	<i>Average Score*</i>
Tension of Self as Compared with Others in General	3.4
Tension Experienced by Coworkers	3.8
Stressfulness of Corrections as Opposed to Other Jobs	4.9
<hr/>	
<i>Perceived Effects of Job Stress on Various Areas</i>	<i>Average Score†</i>
Emotional Health	3.5
Physical Health	3.4
Family Relations	3.2
Job Performance	2.8

\*On a scale of 1 through 6, where 1 is much more relaxed and 6 is much more tense.

†On a scale of 1 through 6, where 1 is no negative effect and 6 is very much negative effect.

drugs, and neighbors. Table 3 shows the results for the correction sample and for the patrol officer sample. (For the patrol officer sample finances were not included.) The correction officers reported most problems in their five coworkers with finances, then health, alcohol, family, children, neighbors, and drugs. For alcohol, they were higher than the patrol officers, and on all the other items they were lower. However, while the officers were lower in this regard than the patrol officers, the results are still striking and suggestive.

#### *Perceptions of Emotional Problems*

The officers reported that, of various kinds of problems, emotional difficulties were most likely to occur as a result of job stress. However, these were not seen as a highly likely consequence of job stress, a perception borne out in their actual reports of perceived emotional problems. Thus, when the officers were asked to indicate on a six-point scale from "never" to "very often" how frequently they experienced various emotional symptoms or problems as a consequence of the stress experienced in their correctional jobs, the average of emo-

tional symptoms reported was not high (2.1).

Of the 19 emotional symptoms listed, most frequently reported in order (average 2.4 to 2.9), were job dissatisfaction, feeling let down, defensive reactions, anxiety, nervousness, brooding over injustice and restlessness, sadness, loneliness, fear, and loss of self-confidence. Least experienced (average 1.4 to 1.7) were, in order: excessive worrying, inability to cope, loss of inhibitions, dissatisfaction with life, and apathy. It is interesting that the emotional problems reported were primarily negative externalizations, such as feeling let down or job dissatisfaction, rather than internalizations, such as apathy or inability to cope.

#### *Perceptions of Interpersonal Problems*

A similar pattern of depreciation may be noted in the officer's perceptions of interpersonal difficulties. Indeed, the average of interpersonal problems reported (1.9) was less than the average for emotional problems (2.1). However, the primary interpersonal problems reported were classic symptoms of burn-out as described by Maslach (1976). Thus, of the 12 interpersonal symp-

TABLE 3  
PERCEPTIONS OF COWORKERS  
WITH PROBLEMS AMONG FIVE  
CLOSEST COLLEAGUES

<i>Types of Problem</i>	<i>Correction Officer (N=143) %</i>	<i>Patrol Officer (N=2,262) %</i>
Alcohol	27	23
Marriage	26	37
Children	14	20
Health	30	36
Finances	36	*N.D.
Drugs	4	10
Neighbors	8	21

\*N.D. = No data

toms listed, most frequently reported (average 2.2 to 2.6) were in order: negative feelings toward inmates, letting out tensions in the wrong places, tightening of discipline, and desire to spend time away from family on days off. Least experienced (average 1.3 to 1.6) in order, were: divorce, sex problems, child problems, and seeking out danger to confront it directly.

That this low report of interpersonal problems was a function of denial, in the family area at least, is suggested by the fact that although the correction officers did not report much negative effect per se on family relations as a result of their job stress, an examination of the divorce rates of the various groups did not confirm these perceptions. The divorce rate for the group as a whole was 20.9, slightly lower than that for police officers (22.6 percent) as reported by Kelling and Pate (1977), but twice as high as the average rate (10.2 percent) for blue- and white-collar workers which Kelling and Pate quote.

#### *Physical Health Problems*

Clear evidence of denial was also manifested with regard to physical health prob-

lems as a result of stress. When asked to note how good their health had been over the past six months on a six-point scale from "very bad" through "very good," the average response of the officers was 5.2 (between "moderately good" and "very good"). This corresponded to responses in Kelling's study (average 4.9 for ICPA sample, 5.3 for the NIOSH sample). Again, with regard to a comparison of their existing health with their health when they first entered corrections, the average response of correction officers was 3.9 (close to the same).

However, the actual illnesses reported by the officers during the preceding six months presented a much different picture. Table 4 shows the frequency of reported serious illnesses during the past six months compared with the patrol officer sample and the occupational sample. For the correction officers, colds, hypertension, hay fever, trouble with teeth, arthritis, and migraines were most frequently reported. While the correction officers were lower than the patrol sample and occupational groups on some illnesses, they were higher on hypertension, hay fever, ulcers, heart disease, diabetes, gout, gall bladder, and hypoglycemia. (The incidence of cancer was too small to receive comment.)

The officers were also asked about the physical health of the officers in their department and here a similar picture emerged. Forty-one percent knew one or two colleagues who had had heart attacks, 23 percent knew three to five who had had heart attacks, and 8 percent knew of six or more coworkers who had had heart attacks. Asked how many knew persons in their department who had had heart attacks while on regular duty, 38 percent knew one or two officers to whom this had occurred, 38 percent knew three to five officers, and three percent knew of six or more officers who had had heart attacks on regular duty.

#### *Perceptions of Job Problems*

Denial again appeared in relation to job performance problems. We have already

TABLE 4

TOTAL ILLNESSES BY FREQUENCY DURING THE PAST SIX MONTHS, CORRECTION OFFICER SAMPLE, PATROL OFFICER SAMPLE AND OCCUPATION SAMPLE

<i>Illness</i>	<i>Correction Officers (N=143) %</i>	<i>Patrol Officers (N=2,262) %</i>	<i>Other Occupations* (N=2,157) %</i>
A cold/influenza	42.7	68.1	70.0
Hypertension/high blood pressure	16.8	10.1	9.2
Hay fever	12.6	11.9	10.8
Trouble with teeth or gums	11.2	14.3	N.D.
Arthritis or rheumatism	8.4	9.5	12.6
Migraine/severe headaches	8.4	13.7	N.D.†
Trouble with seeing	7.8	8.2	12.0
Trouble with gastrointestinal tract	6.3	12.7	N.D.
Ulcers	5.6	5.1	4.8
Trouble with hearing	4.5	6.5	7.8
Bronchitis	4.5	5.6	5.8
Trouble with spine	4.2	13.5	18.8
Heart disease/trouble	3.5	1.4	2.1
Trouble with urinary tract	3.5	4.5	N.D.
Gout	2.9	1.1	N.D.
Repeated skin trouble	2.8	9.6	10.3
Gall bladder trouble	2.4	0.9	N.D.
Diabetes	2.4	1.2	2.2
Whiplash injuries	2.1	5.1	N.D.
Hypoglycemia/low blood sugar	1.4	1.0	N.D.
Paralysis, tremor or shaking	1.4	2.8	N.D.
Asthma	1.4	2.2	2.3
Hernia or rupture	1.4	1.5	2.5
Kidney trouble	0.7	1.7	N.D.
Mental illness/nervous breakdown	0.7	0.7	N.D.
Veneral disease	0.7	0.7	N.D.
Liver trouble	0.7	0.5	N.D.
Epilepsy	0.7	0.3	0.2
Cancer	0.7	0.3	0.2
Tuberculosis	0.7	0.3	0.2
A stroke	0.7	0.2	0.1
Thyroid trouble/goiter	0.7	1.0	2.5

\*Having illness for the past year.

†N.D. - No data collected

noted that classic burn-out symptoms were likely to appear in the officers as a result of their job stress. However, the denial of job difficulties was marked when the attitudes of the officers towards working in correc-

tions, toward their present job, and toward various aspects of their work in corrections were explored. Thus, the attitudes of the group as a whole toward working in corrections were quite positive. The average rating



was 5.0 (moderately) on a six-point scale from "not at all" to "very much." These results were replicated to some extent when the officers were asked how they liked their present jobs. The average liking for the whole group were slightly lower (4.7 versus 5.0).

These findings correspond with recent studies in this area. An Illinois study (Jacobs, 1978) found that 90 percent of correction officers surveyed were either very or somewhat happy in their jobs. The 1968 Joint Commission on Correctional Manpower and Training report found 92 percent of the correctional officers were almost always or usually satisfied with their jobs.

On the other hand, the group members were less positive about the possibility of again taking a job in corrections, knowing what they know now. On a six-point scale from "very unlikely" to "very likely" the average group rating was 4.2 (somewhat likely) in terms of the officers again taking a job in corrections. Moreover, asked to rate the likelihood of their advising a friend to take a job in corrections on a six-point scale from "very unlikely" to "very likely," the groups as a whole were not enthusiastic, averaging 3.2 (close to somewhat likely).

### *Experiential Aspects of Tension*

The officers' descriptions of the kinds of physical, emotional, and behavioral effects which were likely to be associated with their experiences of stress confirmed the macho, aggressive image. For the group as a whole, on a six-point scale from "very unlikely" to "very likely," the 10 most frequently reported, of 27 physical effects listed, were, in order: tense neck muscles, eye strain, tense forehead, butterflies in the solar plexus, general sweating, dry mouth, sweating of hands and feet only, irregular shallow breathing, and gritted teeth. Interestingly, of 19 listed emotional effects, those reported by the officers as most frequently experienced with tension were positive. They saw themselves as first, lively when tense, then energetic, anxious, cheerful, irritable, worried, apprehensive, fatigued,

depressed, resentful, and hopeless. Least common, in order, were: suicidal, murderous, terrified, out of contact with reality, apathetic, destructive, and elated. These findings correspond with those of the Cheek (1967) study of the experience of tension of various diagnostic groups in which the most frequently experienced emotional concomitants of tension for the normal comparison group were feeling good, lively, and energetic. It is also possible that the macho correction officers may rate high on sensation seeking (Zuckerman et al., 1964) and thus enjoy the feelings of tension and danger which are a constant aspect of correctional experience.

With regard to the 13 behavioral effects listed, respondents found themselves most frequently experiencing the following, in order: loud voice, quiet voice, nervous hand or foot movements, excessive eye contact, rapid speech, physically moving forward, and rigid posture. Least associated with tension were, in order: incoherent speech, sturred speech, failure of eye contact, slumped posture, and physically moving back. Thus, in general, respondents reported aggressive or over-assertive rather than under-assertive behavioral responses to tension, again suggesting that this is an externalizing rather than an internalizing population. This supports Poole and Regoli's finding (1980) that stress leads to a shift towards the custodial role and suggests that violent officer-inmate confrontation when officers are under heavy stress may become a problem.

### *Situational Aspects of Stress*

Just as the officers' perceptions of the presence and effects of job stress told one story and actual indicators of their health and marital status another, so their description of the situational aspects of their stress and their attribution of causes presented two different pictures. Thus, when the situational aspects of their job stresses were explored in terms of such matters as presence of role set members, the responses of the officers uniformly suggested that inmate

interaction was their primary source of tension, and that violence was the most feared and disliked aspect of their work.

For instance, when asked how often they tended to experience stress with various role set members, such as inmates, other correction officers, and supervisors, the group as a whole found their interaction with inmates most tension arousing. However, the average was only 3.2 ("occasionally" to "sometimes") on a six-point scale from "never" to "very often." Next stressful were their interactions with those they supervised, then other correction officers, their own supervisors, social workers, immediate family, visitors of inmates, other relatives, friends (other than correctional personnel), and finally, facility inspectors from other agencies.

Asked how often stress was experienced in 15 different places in the correctional facility, such as the church or the inmates' dining room, the groups reported most stress in situations associated with continuous surveillance of inmate interactions, such as the housing tiers, the inmates' dining room, and the corridors. Intermediate were disciplinary activities, visiting areas, and staff meetings. Least stressful were religious and educational sections of the prison and the staff dining room.

This pattern also emerged in relation to temporal aspects of tension. In general, although the differences were not large, the average tension experienced by second shift officers (usually 2:20 through 10:20 P.M.) was higher than that experienced by the third shift (usually 10:20 P.M. through 6:20 A.M.). Tension on the first shift (usually 6:20 A.M. through 2:20 P.M.) was lowest.

In general, during the first shift, the correctional staff is at a maximum complement. At this time, the inmates are primarily in structured activities, such as school or shop, so tension might be expected to be low. The second shift is generally referred to as the "action shift." During this period problems with inmates would be more likely to occur and produce tension because officers are more directly involved with the individual activities of the inmates. During

the third shift, even though the inmates are primarily retired, tension might be high because nighttime is a high point of inmate tension (Cheek et al., 1967). Also, officers could be suffering from a source of stress common to shift workers, interruption of diurnal rhythms (Selye, 1976).

A primary concern about violence appeared in their responses to being asked how likely, on a six-point scale from "very unlikely" to "very likely," they were to feel stress in 27 typical situations in the facility such as meal breaks, taking counts, or disturbances. The groups found most stressful those situations involving violence, such as stabbings (5.0) and inmate disturbances. Personnel matters and special security procedures were midpoint on the stress scale. Least stressful were routine paper work and duties.

A similar pattern appeared when the officers were asked to indicate their degree of liking or disliking of the situations previously rated in terms of stress. In general, the same patterns as those perceived in terms of stress were upheld with situations involving violence being most disliked, and routine activities liked most, but here personnel problems involving competence level of fellow workers began to assume more annoying proportions.

#### *Most Important Sources of Stress*

However, despite their emphasis upon inmate interaction and violence as primary situational aspects of stress, the responses of the officers with regard to what caused correctional stress indicated that beneath these surface situational aspects the situation was much more complex. Thus, the officers were offered 109 possible sources of stress in their work and asked to rate each as being 1 (very unlikely) to 6 (very likely) to contribute to stress on their jobs. These included 11 items in which interacting with inmates was involved (fear of bodily harm, crisis situations, etc.), 61 items involving administrative matters (existence of rigid rules and regulations, conflicting orders from supervisors, etc.), 26 items related to

TABLE 5

## MOST STRESSFUL ASPECTS OF WORKING IN CORRECTIONS\* (N = 143)

- 
1. Lack of clear guidelines for job performance
  2. Facility policies not being clearly communicated to all staff members of the facility
  3. Crisis situations
  4. Getting conflicting orders from your supervisors
  5. Having to do things against your better judgment
  6. Having your supervisor give you things to do which conflict with other things you have to do
  7. Not being treated as a professional
  8. Low morale of other officers
  9. Other personnel putting things off
  10. Lack of training
  11. Officers in the department not being quickly informed about policy changes
  12. Criticism from supervisors in front of inmates
  13. Poor physical conditions and equipment
  14. Having too little authority to carry out the responsibilities assigned to you.
  15. Your immediate supervisor not keeping you well informed
  16. Not having pretty good sharing of information among the officers on all three shifts
  17. Not receiving adequate pay
  18. Not having a chance to develop new talents
  19. Having feelings of pressure from having to please too many bosses
  20. Lack of training in riot control and the use of firearms
  21. Lack of opportunity to participate in decision making
- 

\*In descending order of stressfulness.

job conditions (job isolation, shift work, etc.), 6 items concerned with family relations (fear for family safety, lack of family pride in work, etc.) and 5 with community matters (need to understand legal issues, political community pressure groups, etc.).

For the total group, when all items were ranked in descending order of stress, the administrative items were seen as most stressful (average total of ranks across groups, 277.5). Next, in order, came those related to job conditions (353.4), interactions with inmates (415.1), family relations (468.4), and legal and community matters (475.6). The primacy of administrative sources of stress is also suggested by the study of Jacobs and Kraft (1978) who found that administrative procedures rather than race could better account for tension and conflict in the prison. The 21 items seen as most stressful are shown in Table 5.

In the initial pilot study of correction of-

ficer stress, lack of clear guidelines for job performance also emerged as *the* primary source of stress. Ambiguity about role performance is reflected in 9 other high-rated items, including (2) facility policies not being communicated, (3) crisis situations, (4) getting conflicting orders, (6) having your supervisor give you things to do which conflict with other things you have to do, (10) lack of training, (11) officers in the department not being quickly informed about policy changes, (15) your immediate supervisor not keeping you well informed, (16) not having good sharing of information, (19) having feelings of pressure from having to please too many bosses, and (20) lack of training in riot control and the use of firearms.

As noted earlier, Cressey (1959) and Grusky (1959) have pointed out that correctional organizations produce role ambiguity in the officer as a consequence of the continuing controversy between custody and

treatment, leading to changing goals, policies, and procedures. But conflict between treatment and custody goals was not rated high by the officers as a source of stress. The ambiguity here appears to relate to lack of communication, problems with supervision, and lack of adequate training and appears to have more to do with not having enough information to perform the basic custodial role properly. It is indicative in this regard that "crisis situations" do not appear to be stressful to the officers in terms of the possibility of harm from the inmates, for fear of bodily harm is not highly ranked, but presumably because the officers do not know how to act and might do something wrong. As noted earlier, Aldag and Brief (1978), studying police officer stress, also found role ambiguity to be of critical significance.

A second administrative matter closely related to stress is lack of autonomy in job performance. This is reflected in seven heavily chosen items: having to do things against your better judgment, not being treated as a professional, low morale of other officers, criticism from supervisors in front of inmates, having too little authority to carry out the responsibilities assigned to you, not having a chance to develop new talents, and lack of opportunity to participate in decision making. Lombardo (1979) also found lack of input into decision making and a consequent feeling of powerlessness a major source of stress for officers.

This finding is similar to that of Kroes et al. (1974) in their job stress study of 100 Cincinnati police officers. Circumstances affecting their sense of professionalism, such as reprimands from supervisors, were more stressful than life-threatening situations. In another study, Margolis, Kroes, and Quinn (1974) found that nonparticipation in decision making was the most salient stressor. A Swedish study of white collar workers (Wahlund and Nerell, 1976) tended to support Margolis's observation.

#### *Least Important Sources of Stress*

The 21 items rated least stressful by the officers confirm that, as with the patrol

officers, the correctional officers were not bothered by many situations specific to their occupational role (see Table 6). Temptations, fear of charges of police brutality, feeling of being imprisoned, job isolation, and fear of using deadly force were not bothersome. Job conditions, such as the need for overtime, which is probably seen as positive in terms of overtime pay were not stressful, nor was excessive paper work. Nor were the officers bothered by the effects of their job on family relations. Trouble with children, lack of family pride in their work, and interference with family life were also rated low. Perhaps because of the macho style, the coldness and inflexibility of the prison also appeared not to be a problem. Being like a military organization, having rigid rules and regulations, the need to suppress emotions, and lack of praise from supervisors were rated low. Political community pressure groups, resentment of inmate advantages, and minority group pressures were not seen as problems.

## DISCUSSION

The most important finding of this study is that, according to several objective indicators, correction officers experience considerable stress on the job. Thus, the study shows high rates of divorce and serious health problems in the officers such as hypertension, ulcers, and heart disease, and these rates on stress indicators are even higher than those of police officers previously identified as a highly stressed occupational group. Moreover, the correction officers, like police, perceive many stress-related physical and emotional problems in their fellow workers.

However, again like police, these tough, macho, impassive men deny their feelings and weaknesses—and their job stress. Thus, their self-perceptions of tension and of physical, emotional, interpersonal, and job difficulties are minimal, though they are more willing to acknowledge these kinds of problems in others.

The macho image comes out in other ways in the officers' questionnaire responses,

TABLE 6  
LEAST STRESSFUL ASPECTS OF WORKING IN CORRECTIONS\* (N=143)

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1. Temptations, corruption
  2. Fear of charges of police brutality
  3. Political community pressure groups
  4. Need for overtime, long hours
  5. Facility is too much like a military organization
  6. Fear of losing control of oneself
  7. Resentment of inmates' advantages
  8. Most of the time having tension between you and your children
  9. Need to suppress emotions
  10. Your family not taking pride in the work you do
  11. Feeling your job interferes with family life
  12. Not receiving enough praise for the work you do
  13. Feeling of being imprisoned
  14. Union meetings
  15. Having too much influence over the lives of other people
  16. Job isolation
  17. Excessive paper work
  18. Minority group pressures
  19. Fear of using deadly force
  20. Existence of rigid rules and regulations
  21. Need for skills in interpersonal relationships
- 

\*In ascending order of stressfulness.

reports of actual enjoyment of tension, of aggressive reactions to stress (moving forward physically, loud voice, etc). Furthermore, consistent with the tough, authoritarian image, when asked about causes of correctional stress, they indicate they are not bothered by the military nature of correctional organizations, nor by the presence of rigid rules and regulations. On the contrary, it is "lack of clear guidelines for job performance" that is a major stressor.

To what extent the macho style of the correction officer is a product of selection or of role shaping on the job is unclear. Motivans (1963) finds applicants for custody positions not psychologically unique, though Perdue (1966) reports them to be aggressive. However, considerable evidence exists to indicate that this macho style, termed the "working personality" of the correction officer by Skolnick (1966) is at least in part a product of socialization in the

role. Zimbardo's classic study (Haney, Banks, Zimbardo, 1973) dramatically showed the development of aggressive, rigid, power-intoxicated behavior in a mock prison setting, while Crouch and Marquart (1980) describe how officers learn to act authoritarian, using "bluster tactics" in order to control the inmates.

There is also some evidence that the "working personality" may come home with disastrous results. Family members of officers participating in family stress classes conducted by the authors have commented that they have observed their relatives becoming increasingly controlling, bossy, demanding, suspicious, fearful, negative, critical, cold, impersonal, self-righteous, and self-justifying after taking jobs in corrections. Such changes in the officers could certainly lead to problems in family relations and would certainly help to account for the high divorce rates noted in this study. It

is interesting, however, that in their questionnaire responses the officers deny family problems and do not see them as important sources of stress.

One might then hypothesize that the macho style, whether brought to the job by the officer or learned on it, could be a contributor to his stress. For instance, it may be that correction officers tend to be rigid, authoritarian persons who must have every situation spelled out clearly in order to deal with it comfortably and therefore find "lack of clear guidelines for job performance" a major stressor. It might further be hypothesized that it is threats to their necessarily macho image that makes dealing with inmates the most stressful area of interaction for them. Also, it may be macho pride that makes another variable, "lack of autonomy" or "lack of input into decision making," a major stressor for the officers. In these terms, then, correction officer stress might be a product of authoritarian rigidity of thinking and macho pride plus denial of weakness, driving emotions inward and leading to physical problems as well as psychological burn-out.

However, while these aspects of personal style may well contribute to officer stress, it will be remembered that the officers identified administrative practices as their major source of stress. In this regard, a study by Lawrence (1978) suggests another possibility. In examining the job stress of police officers he found that the personal style of the individual police officer was related to the kinds of job factors producing stress. Thus, three inputs into the situation, the personal style of the correction officer, the characteristics of the organization, and also the interaction between the two may be significant in determining sources of stress and their impact on correctional officers.

Let us now turn then to the organizational aspects of correctional stress. The major sources of administrative stress identified by the officers on the questionnaire were "lack of clear guidelines for job performance" and "lack of input into decision-making." Thus, key questions which must be addressed are, Why are the guidelines for correction job

performance unclear? and Why does this cause so much stress for the officers?

Obviously, one reason for unclear job guidelines is that many complex human situations must be dealt with which cannot be covered adequately by any set of rules, so that flexibility in the enforcement of rules is necessary. Moreover, as Sykes (1958) and others (Carroll, 1974) have pointed out, bending of correctional rules is necessary in order to secure compliance from inmates to facilitate the process of maintaining control. Thus, when the inmate behaves well, the rules are bent favorably, when he behaves poorly, a tightening up occurs. In this way, negotiation secures compliance, in a situation where coercive enforcement, a limited resource at best, would produce resentment and hostility and make control of this hostile, captive group difficult and problematic.

However, flexibility can lead to a confusing situation in the facility (Guenther and Guenther, 1974). The rules tend to be differentially enforced, from one officer to another, from one shift to another. Moreover, the confusion may be compounded by crises management, leading to rapidly changing policies and procedures, plus poor communication downward. In their questionnaire responses, the officers identified poor communication as an important source of stress.

Another complication is that the rules that are relayed from above may simply not be operable. Thus, several of the sources of stress, such as "having your supervisor give you things to do which conflict with other things you have to do," reflect inoperable rules. A major factor in this situation is that the rules have usually been developed by persons completely unfamiliar with the actual working situation (Webb and Morris, 1978). Hence the complaint of the officer of "lack of input into decision making" is less an outburst of injured macho pride than a realistic sense of frustration that the person responsible for the actual enforcement of the rules is seldom involved in creating them. Moreover, officers complain that they are powerless to do anything about changing the rules (Lombardo, 1979). They typically

report that if they want something changed the best way is to work through the inmates whose demands are more likely to receive attention.

The consequence of all this is that the officer is in a situation where he cannot in fact "go by the book," because the book won't work. Indeed, if he did go completely by the book it would create problems because many of the rules would be inoperable and/or trouble producing. Officers may actually be protecting an administrator by not obeying the rules completely. Or, at times, in order to make an unpopular administrator look bad, they will thwart him by too carefully obeying his rules (Lombardo, 1979).

Protectiveness of supervisors is not always reciprocated (Lombardo, 1979; Cheek and Miller, 1982). Another major complaint of officers is lack of administrative support. The officer is in a very vulnerable position. He cannot follow regulations inflexibly but if he does not and something goes wrong he may well be used as a scapegoat and given charges or suspended. On the other hand, if he does try to "go by the book" and discipline the inmates, the officer may find that his disciplinary activities will not be backed by administration, because of administrative fear of litigation and/or "putting the lid on too tight," increasing the officer's sense of powerlessness and feeding his anger both at administration and at the inmates (Carroll, 1974; Fox, in press), a classic double-bind situation!

However, an additional kind of double-bind, in which personal style of the officer and administrative problems interact, is also at work. Ironically, the officer, who is on the front line in controlling the inmates, who must play a macho role, "hang tough," hold in his feelings, and deny his weaknesses, is basically in a powerless position. He cannot expect to be supported in his disciplinary efforts with the inmates, he may be used unfairly as a scapegoat, he has no power to make or change the rules and procedures which govern his job performance, and he is less influential than the inmates.

The officer gets no respect from anyone. Not from the outside community, which sees him as the brute portrayed in the old James Cagney movies, not from the inmates who use him as a dumping ground for their hostility, not from prison administrators who expect him to play the tin soldier. Jacobs and Retzky in their 1975 article on prison guards note that "it would not be an exaggeration to say that administrators and prison professionals feel more respect and greater affinity for the inmate than they do for the guard." A stressful role indeed!

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#### NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> Kelling included two samples, the International Conference of Police Chiefs Associations (ICPA), which used a mailed questionnaire for which respondents were randomly selected, and the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health Study (NIOSH), in which questionnaires were distributed to as many officers as possible in sixteen departments around the country. The ICPA included 1,591 patrol officer respondents, with a 31.6 percent return. The NIOSH sample included 667 respondents, with a 64.9 percent return rate.

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