STRESS IN CORRECTIONS: AN OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUES

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the literature on stress as it relates to working in adult institutional corrections. Indications are that research on this topic has been conducted in a “hit and miss” fashion with no consistent themes or patterns. Future research should be organized around the following questions: (1) To what degree does stress exist in corrections and how is it manifested? (2) Systemically and organizationally, where is stress located? (3) What factors/conditions seem to be correlated with the presence of stress? (4) Are there any means available to eliminate/relieve/reduce stress?

INTRODUCTION

Corrections work is commonly believed to be extremely stressful. Numerous researchers have documented the presence of stress among correctional personnel, while others have attempted to isolate the causes of stress and still others have proposed possible solutions to the problem of stress. This article presents an overview of the issues related to stress in corrections in an attempt to summarize the extant literature systematically. This analysis follows a four-question outline, as follows:

(1) To what degree does stress exist in corrections and how is it manifested? This question deals with the extent to which stress is present among persons who work in corrections, the severity of stress-related effects in individual workers, and the nature of those effects in terms of physical, mental, emotional, and psychological harm.

(2) Systemically and organizationally, where is stress located? The issue here is whether stress is present to greater or lesser degrees in the various subsystems or components (community-based or institutional, adult or juvenile) of the corrections system and where within a particular department stress seems to be present.

(3) What factors/conditions seem to be correlated with the presence of stress? In other words, are there certain personal, occupational, or organizational characteristics that appear to contribute to increases or decreases in stress?

(4) Are there any means available to eliminate/relieve/reduce stress? This issue is relevant to the way correctional agencies administer, manage, and supervise their employees, as well as to policies governing recruitment, selection, and training.
Clarifications

As background to the four-point analysis, it would perhaps be prudent to clarify what is meant by the term "stress." The communication process is difficult at best, and it is made more complicated by the failure of all parties to "read off the same sheet of music." In this article, the work of Hans Selye is used as the point of departure. Selye defined stress as "the nonspecific response of the body to any demand" (1976: 1).

As a medical scientist, Selye was concerned with the physiological alterations resulting from excessive stimulation, whether positive or negative in nature. He borrowed the term "stress" from the field of engineering, where it had long been used to describe the effects of a force acting against a resistance. Further, Selye acknowledged that the term was also commonly used by psychiatrists to describe mental tension. The totality of the bodily changes documented by Selye, including adrenal stimulation, shrinkage of lymphatic organs, gastrointestinal ulcers, and loss of body weight, among others, he concluded, formed a syndrome, which he labeled the "general adaptive syndrome," or G.A.S. (Selye, 1976: 1,55). Selye went on to clarify what stress is through several statements concerning what it is not. For instance, "stress is not simply nervous tension," "stress is not the same as a deviation from homeostasis," "stress is not necessarily something bad," and "stress cannot and should not be avoided" (63). In other words, stress is normal as long as it does not become excessive. Thus, Selye concluded that

stress is the state manifested by a specific syndrome which consists of all the nonspecifically-induced changes within a biologic system. (64)

Later writers have argued against limiting the concept of stress to its physical manifestations alone. Richard S. Lazarus, writing in the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, stated that stress

suggests excessive demands made on men and animals, demands that produce disturbances

of physiological, social, and psychological systems. (1968: 338)

This shift in emphasis from the physiological to the psychological suggests a concept closer to the more popular usage of the term "stress," which commonly refers to "burnout." As Barry A. Farber observed, "both the popular press and the professional literature have often confused or equated 'stress' with 'burnout'" (1983: 14).

Although related, stress and burnout are not synonymous. Farber distinguished the two by saying that burnout is a by-product of "unmediated stress" (14), or that stress from which the person can find no relief. Absent a proper pressure valve, stress becomes debilitating. Such a condition emerges when the environmental demands made on a person are beyond his or her response capability. Farber noted that Selye suggested, although he did not label it as such, a manifestation akin to burnout, in the third stage of his three-stage theory of stress in 1956. This stage, referred to as "exhaustion," occurs when the "cumulative effects of damaging stress have become too severe to allow for adaptation" (Farber, 1983: 15).

The primary focus of this article is stress as it relates to working in adult institutional corrections. Burnout is addressed only when it is identified as a direct adjunct to stress, as in the work of Gerstein, Topp, and Correll (1987). Community-based corrections workers are not included in this review because the differences in working environments make comparisons difficult. Further, juvenile corrections workers are not considered, due to the dearth of stress-related research.

PREVALENCE AND MANIFESTATIONS OF STRESS

It is generally assumed that corrections work is highly stressful. This belief is based partly in fact and partly in speculation. One writer observed that although "there is relatively little research on correctional stress, there is little doubt that stress is a problem in corrections" (Rosefield, 1981: 5). Most stress research has concentrated on causes and cures,
with scant attention given to measuring the presence of stress among corrections-worker populations.

Evidence of stress in correctional officers is both anecdotal and empirical. Several studies completed during the 1980s have pointed to an inconsistent pattern of stress associated with corrections work. The study of stress often involves the use of indirect measures such as attitude and opinion surveys and evaluation of medical problems. For example, Lindquist and White surveyed a sample of 241 correctional officers and found that 39 percent reported their jobs to be either very or more than moderately stressful. Another 29 percent reported moderate stress, while the remaining 32 percent “were in either the slightly or more than slightly stressful category” (1986: 12).

Brodsky (1982) found that a significant number of correctional officers experienced only minimal stress in their work after an initial period of adjustment during which they mastered the challenges of the job and “adapted with few problems” (77). Brodsky also noted that many employees “came to dislike their jobs and ultimately left them” (78). The implication here is that stress serves as a screening mechanism whereby officers who become stressed leave the field while those who are better able to cope remain. This screening process would result in an overall population of officers who evidence a lower level of stress than is commonly assumed.

Cheek and Miller observed that correctional officers “denied their stress and the problems it caused” although “objective indices of physical and marital problems told a different story” (1983: 109). They documented a divorce rate twice as high as the average for blue- and white-collar workers and almost as high as the rate for police officers. Although the officers indicated that their health was moderately good to very good, rates of reported illnesses, such as hypertension, ulcers, heart disease, diabetes, and migraines, were found to be high, although not as high as for some other occupations.

In a study of 147 federal correctional officers, Lasky, Gordon, and Strebalus (1986) observed “greater levels of psychological distress than expected from a nonpatient, normal, male sample” (324). In a study of 141 correctional officers, Honnold and Stinchcomb (1985) noted that during the six-month period preceding the survey, 26 percent complained of high blood pressure, 19 percent of migraine headaches, and 11 percent of ulcers. Some 32 percent revealed that they were currently “under prescribed medication or doctor’s care” (48). These authors went on to say, however, that “the majority of correctional employees are not apparently plagued by debilitating levels of stress” (48).

In addition to physical/medical problems, persons suffering from stress often display attitudinal and behavioral symptoms. In a study of guards at a large maximum-security prison, Poole and Regoli (1980) found that “as role stress increases, custody orientation increases” (219). Guards were seen as attempting to offset the ambiguity in their role “by emphasizing their primary tasks of security and control” (219).

Frances Cheek has observed that prison guards develop a working personality that is at least partly the product of stressful working conditions. Through her studies of New Jersey correctional officers, Cheek catalogued a number of attitudinal and behavioral characteristics, which carry over into guards’ personal lives. These include:

- becoming increasingly authoritarian, controlling, demanding, and bossy (18)
- becoming chronically negative, critical, and stingy with praise (18)
- showing a lack of emotion at home, except for hostility (18)
- development of self-righteous and opinionated attitude (24)

At this point it is probably safe to say, based on the available research, that corrections work is stressful although the extent to which stress is present is certainly not clear. Further, it is by no means established that corrections work is more stressful than other occupational fields such as heavy construction, nursing, secretarial work, and even waiting tables. It is recommended that additional studies, utilizing
multiple stress measures (standardized inventories, medical histories, longitudinal observations of job performance), be conducted with noncorrections occupational group members as controls. As with any phenomenon, accurate description is essential for a complete understanding and for formulating appropriate responses. At present the necessary descriptive research is informative but incomplete.

LOCATING STRESS /BURNOUT ORGANIZATIONALLY AND SYSTEMICALLY

The bulk of stress research has concentrated on adult institutional corrections. It could be hypothesized that, given the central role of adult institutions in the correctional literature, they would be the primary location of stress, as opposed to juvenile facilities and community-based corrections. In fact, almost all of the research described in the preceding section of this article was concerned with adult institutions. This is not to say, however, that stress is not present in other correctional settings. For instance, Whitehead (1987), in a study of probation officers, found that 49 percent "reported their job to be 'very' or 'more than moderately' stressful" (76). However, a comparison group of intensive supervision officers reported very to more than moderately stressful work only 23 percent of the time.

Another question that has received some attention in the literature concerns the precise locus within an institutional setting in which stress is most prevalent. This question can be considered in terms of security level as well as duty position. In a study of federal correctional officers across all six security levels, Lasky, Gordon, and Strebalus (1986) found that concern for personal safety increased directly with security level.

Cullen, Link, Wolfe, and Frank (1985) determined that working in a maximum-security prison was positively correlated with stress, as was the variable of dangerousness. The results of a study of employees in both minimum and maximum security prisons suggested that "the nature of the correctional environment contributes more to burnout" (Gerstein, Topp, and Correll, 1987: 359) than do personal characteristics. It appears from the extant research that stress is greater in the tense and dangerous world of the maximum-security institution than in that of lower security levels.

It should be noted, however, that Blau, Light, and Chamlin (1986) observed no less job satisfaction "among guards in large, maximum security prisons than in other facilities" (146). Location of the prison did seem to be important in that "the level of morale in facilities close to New York City is lower than in facilities in upstate New York, although the relation is not significant" (147).

In terms of duty position, the general assumption appears to be that line officers experience greater stress than do managers and supervisors. This assumption, however, may not be correct. Blau, Light, and Chamlin (1986), for instance, studied over 3,000 employees in New York Department of Corrections' institutions. Their conclusion was that being a guard has no effect on stress (which) indicates that the security responsibilities of guards are not inherently more anxiety producing than the work of individuals who are not guards. (137)

The little research available on correctional supervisors and managers is insufficient to serve as a basis for conclusions concerning the presence of stress. One study (Weinberg, Evans, Otten, and Marlowe, 1985) found that, compared to previously collected data on managers at state psychiatric hospitals, community mental health centers, and a general hospital, corrections managers scored "about in the middle of the human service worker distribution" (141).

Serious attempts to locate stress/burnout within the correctional setting are at present significantly lacking. The few that are available provide little groundwork upon which to establish firm conclusions. It would appear that researchers should concentrate considerably more attention on where within the correctional system (institutional, community-based, adult, juvenile) and where within
a given organization (line officer, manager, supervisor, support staff, treatment personnel) stress is greatest.

**FACTORS /CONDITIONS CORRELATED WITH STRESS**

Of the four issues under consideration in this article, the one that has received the greatest amount of attention pertains to the correlates of stress. Identified correlates can be categorized as personal, occupational, or organizational. Lasky, Gordon, and Strebalus (1986), for example, observed that “Hispanic officers had significantly lower self-esteem than either Caucasian or Black officers” (324). Rosefield (1981) found that “it is the inexperienced or black officer who is most likely to experience stress” (87). Blau, Light, and Chamlin (1986) noted that “whites report higher levels of tension than do nonwhites” (136). Thus, the effect of race and ethnicity on stress remains unclear. Older employees have been seen to report less stress than younger employees in both institutional (Blau, Light, and Chamlin, 1986) and community-based settings (Whitehead, 1987). Other researchers reported no significant relationship between stress and age, gender, or education (Weinberg, Evans, Otten, and Marlowe, 1985; Blau, Light, and Chamlin, 1986, for education).

Gender is of particular interest, especially in light of the growing number of women being employed as correctional officers in men’s prisons. Lynn E. Zimmer (1986), for instance, found that in addition to the challenges facing male correctional officers, women seeking professional status in a traditionally male work environment were confronted with the problems of sex discrimination and sexual harassment. During interviews, women guards stated that their male counterparts regularly denied them “the full socialization experience that is necessary for adjustments” (83) to their new job. Zimmer also found that sexual harassment by male coworkers seemed to be more troublesome than that by inmates. Not only did coworkers use both verbal and physical means to harass women, the problem was compounded by the failure of supervisors to take actions to end the harassment. The impact of the initial harassment by coworkers, coupled with the lack of supervisory intervention, resulted in a gender-based form of stress not experienced by male officers. In a similar vein, the female officers interviewed by Nancy C. Jurik (1988) expressed concern that there were no organizational policies to integrate them into male prison settings. As a result:

these women have to bear the burden of their differentness alone. An outgrowth of this burden is work related stress. Female officers uniformly perceived that such stress exerted a strong negative effect on their job performance. (302–03)

Characteristics of the corrections occupation that seem to be correlated with stress include dangerousness (Cullen, Link, Wolfe, and Frank, 1985; Lombardo, 1981), the worker’s lack of control (Dembo and Dertke, 1986), his or her powerlessness (Gerstein, Topp, and Correll, 1987), the nature of interactions with inmates (Cheek and Miller, 1983; Lombardo, 1981; Lindquist and Whitehead, 1986; Brodsky, 1982), and the workload (Rosefield, 1981). Gerstein, Topp, and Correll (1987) concluded that their results suggest that the nature of the correctional institution environment contributes more to burnout experienced by correctional staff than does personal information about such staff members. (359)

The greatest stressor, however, appears to be the correctional organization itself. As Brodsky pointed out, the sources of stress cannot be pinned to the characteristics of the individual employees alone but must also be seen as part and parcel of the structure and culture of the correctional institution and its role in American society. (1982:83)

Lindquist and Whitehead (1986) found organizational factors, such as departmental chain of command and supervisory practices, to be significantly correlated with stress. Some 60 percent of the officers in their study “reported at least one organizational stressor”
Role definition problems and role conflict resulting from unclear supervisor expectations have been tied to stress by Rosefield (1981) and Cheek and Miller (1983). Lasky, Gordon, and Strebalus (1986) observed that lack of participation in decisionmaking was related to stress in federal correctional officers. Many corrections workers associate stress with supervisory and management personnel. Brodsky (1982) included in a list of conditions precipitating long-term stress such problems as

- pressure designed to force them to resign or ask to transfer
- no backing when attacked or goaded by inmates
- no support in dealing with public problems with visitors, protestors, press.

Lombardo (1981) cited poor communication between corrections officers and administrators as a significant stressor. He also found a belief among officers that “administrators, supervisors, and, at times, other officers not only fail to assist them but also actually work against them” (135). The officers in Lombardo’s study also complained that departmental policies denied them opportunities for decisionmaking and for taking increased responsibility. Cheek and Miller (1983) found administrative items ranked as most stressful, ahead of things such as “job related conditions, interactions with inmates, family relations, and legal/community matters” (116).

Interestingly, chief among the cited stressors affecting prison supervisors and managers are situations related to subordinates. These include decisions being made without consultation, poor subordinate productivity, and the need to discipline or terminate subordinates (Weinberg, Evans, Otten, and Marlowe, 1985). It would appear that superior/subordinate relations are a major source of stress for both administrators and line officers.

Additional factors seen as contributing to stress include low pay, slow promotions, and insufficient benefits (Rosefield, 1981). Black (1982) listed peer group pressure and slow promotional opportunities as sources of stress. Grossi and Berg (1991) stated that “peer support was found to increase work stress” (78), which they explained through “compromises in one’s personal value system” that “may need to be made in order to gain the acceptance of other officers” (79). Finally, in a finding that should be of interest to criminal justice educators, Gerstein, Topp, and Correll (1987) observed that correctional employees who “chose their current job because of their educational background” (361) reported high levels of emotional and physical exhaustion. Grossi and Berg (1991), on the other hand, found that “officers with more education and experience report greater job satisfaction” (77).

At this point, there seems to be no clear consensus as to which factors can be consistently correlated with stress in corrections. More work is needed in this area. Future research should concentrate on cross-system and cross-organization analyses in an effort to isolate stressors that are not bound to particular jobs, roles, and duty positions. Studies comparing stress in different regions of the United States also would be useful, as would those utilizing noncorrections control groups.

COUNTERING STRESS

Strategies for eliminating/relieving/reducing stress can be grouped generally into three categories: training, individual coping, and administrative change. Goldstein (1981), for example, suggested that correctional officers “develop a set of coping responses that can be generalized across situations” (225). This can be facilitated by means of cognitive skill training, the goal of which is to “modify premises, assumptions, and attitudes that underlie thinking” (225). Goldstein went on to say that cognitive skill training “should not replace other treatment or training approaches, but rather should serve as a primary tool in a repertoire of possible stress management tools” (226). The key here is the combination of the individual and organizational commitment to effective training.

Training has been proposed also by Rosefield (1981), who suggested “innovative training and management practices” (90) as a way to attack identified stress factors. He
also recommended management skills training for supervisory personnel to help them move away from the traditional authoritarian style of management. Stress awareness training, especially during the preservice period, would "prepare officers for what is ahead" (92–93).

Frances Cheek (1983) recommended Family Stress Training, in which both husbands and wives "are taught relaxation techniques that will help them to let go of stress and tension" (24). Her own follow-up studies of New Jersey officers who have gone through this training have indicated improved communication in the family setting.

Lombardo (1981) found that many officers developed individual coping strategies such as taking second jobs, engaging in hobbies, and establishing exaggerated routines to provide themselves with a sense of certainty. Black (1982) said that corrections officers must make changes in their lifestyles and learn to admit to themselves that they have physical and emotional limitations. Specifically, he recommended that officers utilize a physical exercise program, recognize the value of their job, and develop social contacts with persons outside the prison environment. He also has encouraged officers to be willing to share their problems with people they can talk to freely and to gain control of their work by setting goals and priorities.

Zimmer (1986) identified three adjustment strategies utilized by female correctional officers: the institutional role, the modified role, and the inventive role. In the first, women attempt to follow institutional rules as closely as possible while ignoring male resistance and downplaying their female status. In the second, women rationalize that they cannot do the job as well as men. They try to avoid direct contact with inmates and rely on male officers to back them when necessary. In the inventive role the female status is viewed as an advantage by women who feel that what they lack in physical strength they can make up with better interpersonal skills.

The individual's ability to control stress through his or her own efforts may have limitations, however. Cullen, Link, Wolfe, and Frank (1985) studied correctional officers in one state and concluded that for the most part "individual coping factors (such as peer support, family support, and education) had negligible or negative effects on stress" (522).

Several researchers have suggested administrative actions of various sorts to help relieve stress among employees. For instance, Cheek and Miller (1983) suggested that clarification of job performance guidelines and better communication from supervisors would reduce stress levels. Brodsky (1982) also emphasized "greater participation by employees in the decision-making process" (97) along with the establishment of achievable goals for the organization. Other recommendations include the development of managerial practices that would take into account the "fragility of people under stress" and would be "supportive of them while they adapt to work and change" (97). Broksky's additional recommendations include proper selection of employees, in-service educational programs, and meaningful recognition of workers. All of these proposals are directed toward organizational policy.

Obviously, strategies to counteract and even prevent stress should be uppermost on the minds of correctional administrators. Administrators also should be sensitive to research findings indicating that their personnel and management practices appear to be among the chief correlates of stress and burnout. Research on methods of eliminating / relieving / reducing stress is promising, but absent conclusive findings on the three issues previously discussed, it seems unlikely that decisive preventing measures will be forthcoming soon.

CONCLUSION

The present discussion represents an analysis of the existing literature on stress in corrections along a four-point framework. The same framework is suggested as a guide to future research. The problem of stress in corrections has yet to be attacked in a systematic fashion, and, as a result, research findings are fragmented and tentative. A comprehensive, structured approach is needed and must be
employed if research on this issue is to mature and become meaningful and useful.

REFERENCES
