Stress and Job Dissatisfaction Among Correctional Officers: An Unexpected Finding
Elizabeth L. Grossi and Bruce L. Berg
*Int J Offender Ther Comp Criminol* 1991 35: 73
DOI: 10.1177/0306624X9103500107

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://ijo.sagepub.com/content/35/1/73

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://ijo.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://ijo.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://ijo.sagepub.com/content/35/1/73.refs.html

-- Version of Record - Mar 1, 1991

What is This?
Stress and Job Dissatisfaction Among Correctional Officers: An Unexpected Finding*

Elizabeth L. Grossi
Bruce L. Berg

Abstract: A number of previous studies have examined the impact of stress on correctional officers. Findings in several of these previous studies indicate that peer support is positively related to increases in work stress. This, however, tends to contradict theoretical assumptions about the ability of support systems to offer coping mechanisms for stress. This research examines the question of methodological precision by assessing the indice used to measure “peer support.” The finding described here is that, while “peer support” has been used as a reliable indicator, it well may be an invalid one when measuring work stress.

INTRODUCTION

This study began with the objective of investigating the relationship between stressors, coping mechanisms, and three specific types of stress experienced by correctional officers. These three types of stress include job dissatisfaction, work stress (environmental effects of job related stress), and life stress. In addition to many of the usual findings one might anticipate in a study of stress and correctional officers, this research inadvertently uncovered a potentially serious imprecision of measurement. This imprecision is noteworthy because it involves a measurement indice commonly employed in many previous studies of correctional officer stress.

Our research begins with a brief description of the various factors which typically operate as stressors in the work environment of correctional officers. Our discussion will include awareness of job dissatisfaction’s potential for stressful effects. Next, mechanisms ordinarily used by correctional officers as coping devices are examined in relation to their fitness for reducing stress. Following these considerations, this article will examine the implications of using a particular measurement indice, given its apparent lack of practical validity.

*The authors wish to thank the Kentucky Correctional Cabinet, for permission to conduct the research and for their cooperation throughout the project. As well, the authors would like to acknowledge the assistance of Dr. Gary Sykes during the design and implementation stages of the research, and Drs. Gennaro F. Vito and Thomas J. Keil for comments on an earlier version of this work.

ENVIRONMENTAL STRESSORS

The stressful experiences of police officers and correctional officers appear as the focus in a number of studies conducted by scholars from a variety of disciplines. Issues such as alienation, burnout, role stress, or various versions of job dissatisfaction and related stress issues have each served as focus topics in previous studies on correctional officers (Toch & Klofas, 1982; Cheek & Miller, 1983; Cullen, Link, Wolf, and Frank, 1985b; Lasky, Gordon, & Srebalus, 1986; Gernstein, Topp, & Correll, 1987).

Paralleling the findings commonly identified in studies on police officers, research on correctional officers and stress indicate this occupational group does suffer from higher levels of stress and stress induced illnesses than many other occupational groups (Brodsky, 1977; Wynne, 1977; Cheek & Miller, 1983; Lasky et al., 1986). For example, Wynne (1977) found the rate of heart attacks among correctional officers appreciably higher than among other kinds of state workers. Cheek and Miller (1983) reported that correctional officers had higher frequencies of hypertension, hay fever, heart disease, diabetes, gall bladder problems, and hypoglycemia than a comparable sample of police officers.

In previous research the relationship between stress and job dissatisfaction among correctional officers was largely attributed to “role conflict” (Poole & Regoli, 1980; Digman, Barrera, & West, 1986; Whitehead & Linquist, 1986). According to these investigations, the intrinsic dangerousness of the prison environment, as well as the particular security level of a facility, contribute little to the stress levels of correctional officers.

Several studies have suggested that various social support systems (e.g., supervisory support, peer support, family support) play an important role in reducing stress. Other studies have indicated that certain aspects of social support may actually elevate stress among correctional officers (Veneziano, 1984; Cullen, Link, Wolf, & Frank, 1985b; Whitehead & Linquist, 1986). Our research will show these contradictions may actually point to a similar imprecision in measurement uncovered in the current study.

In large part, the present investigation is a partial replication of a study by Cullen, et al. (1985b). Similar to Cullen and associates’ (1985b) analysis, our study examines stress among correctional officers (Grossi, 1989). The current research, however, differs from Cullen and his associates’ in that: (a) This study does not include Cullen’s correctional orientation scale, and (b) a scale is added that is designed to measure stress produced from the effects of court decisions that culminate in various prison policies (Cullen et al., 1985a). This innovative measure is included primarily because employees of one institution where data were collected worked under a “Consent Decree” (Kendrick v. Bland, 1981), and (c) the current sample
includes officers from medium and minimum security levels, rather than the maximum security facilities researched by Cullen, et al. (1985b).

The Cullen et al. (1985a, 1985b) studies explored the impact of stress on correctional officers using a “social support model.” This model suggested that stressful experiences or “stressors” do not automatically induce or increase one’s stress levels. Instead, stressors operating in concert with various social supports and coping mechanisms ultimately determine one’s level of occupational stress. Consequently, those individuals who maintain firm and healthy systems of social support tend (a) to operate more effective coping mechanisms, and (b) to fend off most negative effects of stress. Such persons are likely to employ what Selye (1975) calls eustress, or positive effects from stress (higher levels of energy, motivation to complete one's tasks, and so forth).

METHODS

The Sample. The sample used in our replication study includes 106 line level correctional officers. These officers are employed at three Kentucky correctional institutions that contain adult males. Seventy-one percent of these officers were employed at medium security facilities. The remaining 29% of the sample worked in a minimum security facility.

Selected demographics of this sample indicate that most officers are white males (92% & 77%, respectively), the age range is from 23 to 64 (a mean age of 38 years), and the years of experience in correctional work from 1 to 35 years (a mean of 5 years).

Furthermore, educational levels for officers ranged from a low of some “high school” to “some graduate school.” Most respondents had completed high school, only four percent had completed a four-year college program. For the most part, these demographics are similar to those identified by Cullen et al. (1985b) in the sample they surveyed.

The Questionnaire. This study used a self-administered questionnaire, a modified version of a mail-returned survey. The questionnaire included 100 items. Some of these items assessed stress in the work place, while other items focused on coping mechanisms. Other questions on the survey included demographic information, as well as questions about social support systems, both inside the work place and at home.

Questionnaires were distributed to a random sample of 200 correctional officers during April 1987. Questionnaires were placed in plain white envelopes together with a letter of explanation and a consent form. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured. Each officer was requested to return completed questionnaires to a specific site near each facility. One
hundred and thirty-three officers completed and returned questionnaires, a response rate of 67%. Most of these were "line officers."

**Measures.** In a manner similar to Cullen et al. (1985b, p. 507), we operationally defined stress as, "the psychological discomfort or tension which results from exposure to stressors." In our research, we consider two related facets. First, we include a scale designed to measure "work stress." This six-item scale is directly taken from Cullen et al. (1985b, p. 519) and assesses the anxiety and pressure perceived by officers while at work. Second, we consider "job dissatisfaction." To assess this aspect of stress, we include indices developed by Quinn and Shephard for their "Quality of Employment Survey" (Quinn & Shephard, 1974)\(^1\).

In this study, stressors are operationally defined as circumstances which place unreasonable or distinctive demands on an individual, and are usually capable of producing emotional/psychological discomfort. In short, situations or events which invoke stress.

Three stressor scales were used in this study. These included a role problem scale, a court problem scale, and a dangerousness scale. The five-item role problem scale was adapted from one used by Poole and Regoli (1980) in their study of stress and correctional officers. The court problem scale was a five-item index taken from a study of police stress conducted by Cullen et al. (1985a). This scale measures officers' feelings concerning role constraints created by various judicial decisions. Although originally designed to evaluate police officers' attitudes, the application of this scale to correctional officers seemed appropriate. Similar to police officers, correctional officers have become increasingly involved with restraints and policies related to court decisions. Thus, as with police officers, correctional officers should logically experience stress related to various court or legislative decisions which impact on their work environment.

Coping mechanisms, refer to the capacity to deal effectively with or to protect oneself from the negative consequences of stress. Again, consistent with Cullen et al. (1985b), we examine measures of coping mechanisms as they arise among various social support systems. In particular, two scales were used to measure the ability of social support systems to mediate stress. One scale addressed peer and supervisory support, and was intended to consider support found in the correctional officer's work environment. A second scale was used to consider the ability of family and community support to provide coping or mediating strategies for correctional workers.

**FINDINGS**

As is appropriate for the data, multivariate analysis is used to assess the effects of social support on stress. The findings shown in Table 1 reveal that
TABLE 1
EFFECTS OF STRESSORS, COPING FACTORS AND SOCIAL STATUSES ON JOB DISSATISFACTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>Beta</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race (1 = white, 0 = black)</td>
<td>.347</td>
<td>.032</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex (1 = male, 0 = female)</td>
<td>.300</td>
<td>.042</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-.794</td>
<td>-.267a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correctional Experience</td>
<td>-.117</td>
<td>-.192c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Security Level:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 = medium, 0 = minimum)</td>
<td>-.143</td>
<td>-.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court Problems</td>
<td>-.023</td>
<td>-.035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisory Support</td>
<td>-.071</td>
<td>-.161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Support</td>
<td>-.155</td>
<td>-.298b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Support</td>
<td>-.031</td>
<td>-.084</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Support</td>
<td>.010</td>
<td>-.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role Problems</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>.061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dangerousness</td>
<td>-.022</td>
<td>-.036</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ R^2 \quad .31 \]
\[ F \text{ Value for Equation} \quad 3.442^a \]
\[ \text{Degrees of Freedom} \quad 12.93 \]
\[ \text{Constant} \quad 26.80 \]

\[ ^a p < .01; ^b p < .05; ^c p < .10. \]

...education, and the amount of correctional officer experience, have a significant effect on job satisfaction \((P < .05)\). Additionally, peer support also is influential on job satisfaction \((P < .10)\).

Thus, these data indicate that officers with more education and experience report greater job satisfaction. And, to a lesser extent, officers with high levels of peer support are also more satisfied with their jobs. The findings that officers with more education tend to be more satisfied and less stressed by their work is interesting for several reasons. First, these findings seem to contradict the work of Jurik, Halembo, Musheno, and Boyle (1985), who argued that education among correctional officers is related to attempts to professionalize correctional work which, in turn, leads to dissatisfaction with the job. However, considering a similarity with police officers, it may be that attempts to professionalize correctional officers actually is more frequent among administrators and not among line workers.

Police administrators found that, throughout the 1980s, professionalization could not be built on the foundation of increased levels of education for line level workers. As with police officers, correctional line officers are more appropriately described as “semiskilled workers” rather than professionals (Ritzer & Walczak, 1986).
These findings are interesting. The measurement indices are essentially the same, yet Cullen and his associates' (1985b) findings are contradicted. Cullen et al. (1985b) reported a positive relationship between education and dissatisfaction with the officers' role.

In an attempt to explain this discrepancy, we began to view the potential mediating effects from various social support systems as stress coping mechanisms. The data disclose that officers with greater peer support tended to be more satisfied with their jobs. Perhaps the most surprising finding occurred when supervisory supports and family support were compared with work stress. As Table 2 indicates, supervisory, family, community, and peer support had no significant influence on reducing work stress. Yet, peer support was found to increase work stress. Although these findings were not statistically significant, peer support and work stress were positively related. The directional relevance of this association appears quite important.

The fact that peer support possibly increases work stress confirms similar findings by Cullen et al. (1985b, p. 522). In fact, this confirms the work of several other researchers who investigated similar phenomena (Lombardo, 1981; Long, Shouksmith, Voges, & Roach, 1986; Cullen et al., 1985a).

### Table 2

**Effects of Coping Factors and Social Statuses on Work-Stress**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>Beta</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race (1 = white, 0 = black)</td>
<td>.212</td>
<td>.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex (1 = male, 0 = female)</td>
<td>.037</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>−.619</td>
<td>−.097</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correctional Experience</td>
<td>.295</td>
<td>.226&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Security Level:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 = medium, 0 = minimum)</td>
<td>.912</td>
<td>.064</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court Problems</td>
<td>−.171</td>
<td>−.121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisory Support</td>
<td>−.033</td>
<td>.034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Support</td>
<td>.120</td>
<td>.107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Support</td>
<td>−.048</td>
<td>−.061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Support</td>
<td>.029</td>
<td>.027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role Problems</td>
<td>.416</td>
<td>.366&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dangerousness</td>
<td>.490</td>
<td>.371&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| R<sup>2</sup> | .34 |
| F Value for Equation | 4.005<sup>a</sup> |
| Degrees of Freedom | 12.93 |
| Constant | 12.393 |

<sup>a</sup>p < .01; <sup>b</sup>p < .05.
On the face of it, having solid peer support that increases one's level of work stress seems to directly contradict reality and logic. Given the original hypothesis, which suggested that peer support and other support systems serve as mechanisms to reduce stress, the current finding seems all the more confusing. What explanations can be offered? One possible explanation suggested is that serious imprecision of stress measures exist—or, that validity may be lacking.

A closer examination of "peer support" in the correctional setting may suggest that this measure, as it is commonly used, may not be appropriate for attempting to measure stress. In an effort to obtain peer support, correctional officers may be placed in various positions which compromise their personal sense of integrity, values, or sense of right and wrong. For example, many correctional officers develop a sense of esprit de corps similar to what researchers have observed in police work (Bittner, 1980; Bennett, 1984; Reuss-Ianni, 1984). Minor infractions of institutional policy by one officer may be covered-up by another officer. Compromises in one's personal value system may need to be made in order to gain the acceptance of other officers. For instance, some officers may disagree with various institutional policies that appear favorable to other officers. In order to enhance their social acceptance by the majority, the minority may remain silent, but discontent. These elements combine to increase both the likelihood of solid peer support and high levels of stress. Therefore, using peer support as an indicator of work stress may yield inaccurate or misleading results. Rather than peer support itself being measured, the relationship may be an artifact of indices used to assess peer support.

**DISCUSSION**

Those who have studied the internal workings of correctional institutions may recognize that powerful forces within the correctional system have a stronger influence over the behavior of correctional officers than the administrators of the institution, legislative decrees, or agency policies. These social forces may be understood as related to a "correctional officer subculture," similar to that found in policing. Unlike policing, correctional subculture has not been well documented by research, and further examination is required.

It is an assumption that influence of a correctional officer subculture grows out of the characteristics associated with conflicting pressures in correctional work. These presumed setting-related stressors are remarkably similar to those commonly associated with police officers and police work (Bittner, 1980; Goldstein, 1990). These stressors are shown below:

1. The ever-present potential for physical danger.
2. Hostility directed at officers by inmates, their families, and often even the public.
3. Unreasonable demands and expectation on their role as correctional officers; vacillating political attitudes toward the institutional role of corrections.
4. A tedious and unrewarding work environment.
5. The dependence correctional officers place on one another to effectively work in the institution safely.
6. The reality that one can not always act the way either one would choose to, or the way the public might expect them to.

When researchers seek to measure peer support, then, they most likely tap into the effects of these social forces on correctional officers. Again, it may be that in order to attain a satisfactory level of peer support, and reduce conflicting pressures endemic to correctional institutions, correctional officers must compromise their personal values and interests. It remains, however, for future research to more comprehensively examine the possible effects from a correctional officer subculture.

**SUMMARY**

The problem identified here focuses upon the “validity and reliability” of stress and peer support measures. Previous studies have used peer support as an indicator (or predictor) of work stress and obtained similar results. It would appear, then, that peer support is a reliable indicator of work stress and indirectly, of job satisfaction. When the validity of these indicators, is examined, they fail to work predictably.

**NOTE**

1 A third facet to stress considered in the full study was “life Stress.” This aspect of stress was intended to consider whether officers were affected by stress outside of the work environment during their everyday lives. This consideration conforms to the approach taken by Cullen et al. (1985b). Results from this aspect of stress and correctional officers are not discussed in this note.

**REFERENCES**


Elizabeth Grossi, M.A. (Doctoral Student)
Bruce L. Berg, Ph.D.
Assistant Chair
Department of Criminology
Indiana University of Pennsylvania
210 Walsh Hall
Indiana, Pennsylvania 15701
U.S.A.