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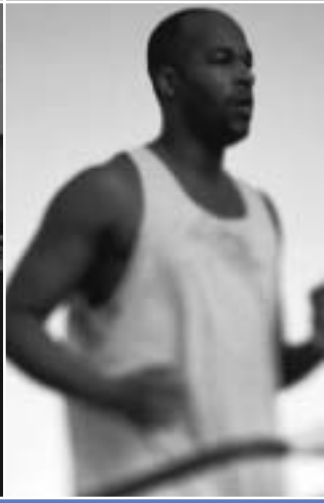

Stress Among Probation and Parole Officers and What Can Be Done About It

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Stress Among Probation and Parole Officers and What Can Be Done About It

This Research for Practice is based on "Addressing Probation and Parole Officer Stress," by Peter Finn and Sarah Kuck, final report to the National Institute of Justice, 2003, available online at www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/nij/grants/207012.pdf.

Findings and conclusions of the research reported here are those of the authors and do not reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

The study on which this summary is based was conducted by Abt Associates Inc., and sponsored by the National Institute of Justice under task order T–023, "Addressing Probation and Parole Officer Stress."

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

Probation and parole officers, like their counterparts in law enforcement and corrections, can experience a great deal of job-related stress. Their stress also can affect supervisors, support staff, and family members. Moreover, levels of stress may have increased in recent years, due in part to greater violence by offenders on probation and parole. The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) funded a study that examined the effects of stress on community corrections officers and identified promising stress reduction programs.

What did the researchers find?

Officers and their agencies can gain major benefits from a stress reduction program, including cost savings, improved staff performance, and increased safety for staff and the public. Programs now underway nationwide show promise in preventing and treating stress. The major sources of stress for community corrections officers are high caseloads, excess paperwork, and deadline pressures. Combined, these factors make it difficult for many officers to find the time to properly supervise their caseloads. Officers cope by taking "mental health" days, requesting transfers, or retiring early. Physical exercise is the method of choice for coping with the stress.

The programs studied vary greatly in services provided, who provides them, their structure, and other features. Some programs contract with outside providers, while others train peer supporters to help their coworkers. Programs may address critical incidents, offer counseling, provide training in relaxation exercises, or facilitate physical exercise. Some programs combine several of these approaches.

Success can be measured in a number of ways. Burnout levels measured in one of the programs studied were lower after training; two other programs produced marked reductions in physical and psychological stress. The measure of success for one program was its full incorporation into the agency.

Peter Finn and Sarah Kuck

Stress Among Probation and Parole Officers and What Can Be Done About It

Probation and parole officers stand at the hub of the criminal justice system. Theirs are the only professions that deal with offenders at each stage of the criminal justice system. As a result, they face, to some degree, every criminal justice practitioner problem. Their work exacts a toll in job-related stress.[1]

Knowing the causes of stress and its adverse effects for officers, the agency, and public safety can be a first step in tackling the problem. This report reviews the causes and effects of stress among probation and parole officers and gives practical information about promising stress reduction programs.

Stress and its causes

Not much research has been conducted on work-related stress among community corrections officers. Results from this study (see "How the Research Was Conducted"), combined with the sparse evidence from previous research, indicate that many of them experience considerable job-related stress. Stress also affects supervisors, support staff, and family members.

Dangerous jobs. Probation and parole work can be dangerous (see "The Work of Probation and Parole Officers"). Between 39 and 55 percent of officers have been victims of work-related violence or threats, according to surveys conducted in four States. The types and levels of stress vary with the nature of the work and the kinds of offenders supervised. For example, parole officers who work in a facility or community setting may be concerned for their own safety.

Many officers believe, with good reason, that their work has become even riskier. Offenders sentenced to probation and released on parole commit more serious crimes than in the past, and more offenders have serious drug abuse histories and show less hesitation in using violence.[2] Yet almost all sources of stress cited by the officers interviewed for the study stem from the the agency

About the Authors

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"My overall level of stress? It can vary, but there is always some—and, on some days, a whole lot."
—an officer[3]

How the Research Was Conducted

The researchers reviewed published and unpublished materials on stress and related topics and talked with 45 officers, supervisors, agency administrators, counselors, trainers, and officers of the American Probation and Parole Association to identify the nature and scope of the problem. Telephone interviews were held with people associated with five of the nine programs selected to study. The researchers visited the four other programs and conducted interviews with several people in each.

The programs. The programs were identified by canvassing the 45 individuals contacted for the study, obtaining information from Corrections and Law Enforcement Family Services, and exploring and posting requests on electronic bulletin boards dedicated to probation and parole officers' interests.

To be selected, a program had to meet two criteria: have a formal structure and at least minimal operational data. The researchers gave preference to programs whose outcomes had been evaluated.

Study limitations. Because neither the programs nor the officers and supervisors contacted were selected at random, they are not intended to be representative of all programs or of members of the two professions.

Conversations and site interviews were confidential but not anonymous: The officers were aware that the researchers knew their names. This may have affected their openness in expressing their views.

itself, not the dangers they face on the job.

The "big three" sources of stress. High caseloads are the major source of stress. It is no wonder that officers report heavy caseloads to be the most stressful aspect of their work—the average supervision caseload of a probation officer is very high: 139. Paperwork follows as the next most significant stress factor for many officers. Even when management information systems have reduced paperwork, officers still may be dealing with unwieldy hardware and software. Deadlines, many of which are unexpected or cannot be controlled, are the third most common stress factor.

These sources of stress typically combine to produce a

frustrating result—not enough time to supervise caseloads properly. As a result, some officers prioritize their cases into offenders they supervise closely and those they partially, largely, or even completely ignore.

Lesser causes. An astonishing 87 percent of probation officers, according to one survey, said they disliked their supervisor.[4] Among the officers contacted for the current study who cited their supervisor as a major source of stress, most say the reason is failure to recognize a job well done. Some officers say they have few chances for advancement. Low salaries are a related stress factor; the median salary for probation officers and correctional treatment specialists in 1999 was just over $36,000.[5]

Some officers feel they are held accountable for offenders' misconduct. Because they shoulder the responsibility when an offender threatens public safety, they feel they have fallen down on the job. Moreover, because community alternatives for offenders are decreasing in many jurisdictions, officers may have limited options for imposing sanctions or offering rehabilitation.

How do officers cope?

Probation and parole officers use a range of methods to cope. Many take extra sick leave simply to relieve the pressure. Some of their illnesses—lower back pain or headaches, for example—may be real but at the same time result from work-related stress. Some officers request transfers of position; others apply for early retirement.

Some coping methods are more positive. When asked how they deal with stress in a positive way, more officers cited physical exercise than any other technique. Other methods include discussing cases with fellow officers, seeking support through religion, "venting," and talking to a family member.

"Yes, I take mental health days. I use them and I get in trouble a lot, but it's a case of self-preservation."
—an officer

Why create a stress reduction program?

A program that helps prevent and relieve officer stress can save money, improve staff performance, and enhance the safety of officers and the public. It may also assist support staff, supervisors, and family members.

Cost savings. Startup costs are a consideration, but a stress program can save

The Work of Probation and Parole Officers[a]

Although responsibilities of probation and parole officers differ, much of their work is similar, especially in supervising offenders. During the past two decades, the community corrections profession has expanded its focus beyond offender supervision and treatment to encompass community and public safety concerns.

Probation is a sentence involving a period of supervision in the community. Typically, probation officers supervise offenders during regular office contacts, visit them at home or work, and contact them in other ways within the community. Other duties may include investigating offenders' backgrounds, writing presentence investigative reports, and recommending sentences.

Parole is a period of conditional supervision after prison; that is, parolees may be returned to prison for violating the conditions of release. The judge, along with the parole agency or parole officer, stipulates these conditions. Parole officers also have regularly scheduled office visits with clients and contact them at home, work, and within the community.

The latest figures show more than 60,000 probation officers and 11,000 parole officers in the United States.[b]

Notes

a. For more about this subject, see Abadinsky, H., *Probation and Parole: Theory and Practice,* 8th ed., Prentice Hall: Old Tappan, NJ, 1997.

b. Camp, C., and G. Camp, *The Corrections Yearbook 2000,* Middletown, CT: Criminal Justice Institute, 1999, and *The Corrections Yearbook 2001: Adult Systems,* Middletown, CT: Criminal Justice Institute, 2001.

money, or at least recoup some or all setup and operation costs. One benefit is reducing the costs of recruiting, screening, and training due to turnover, which is high among probation officers.[6] Another benefit may be fewer costly legal actions as a result of fewer employees filing stress-related legal claims.

Improved staff performance. When officers take "mental health days," other employees' workloads increase. A stress program can decrease the frequency of calling in sick. It can also increase productivity by improving staff morale and reducing conflict between line staff and supervisors.

Increased safety for staff and the public. When officers are distracted by a critical incident, sending them into the field can be dangerous. They may be unable to concentrate on safety or stay alert, and they may be less able to resolve confrontations peaceably. As a result, when a critical incident occurs, the agency should notify all employees and fully describe the outcome. This will help them share information on handling these incidents.

Turnover also can compromise safety because rookies may have to replace seasoned professionals. A stress program can reduce turnover by intervening before employees become alienated and by helping disgruntled employees work out their dissatisfaction.

Keys to success

An administrator's decision to create or expand a stress reduction program is just the beginning. There are also important planning and management considerations.

Selecting talented and dedicated staff. The quality of the staff can make or break a program, especially because well-developed interpersonal skills are so essential. Administrators will need to decide, for example, whether to hire professional contractors or train in-house staff. The advantage of hiring outside professionals is that they generally do not need training. By contrast, peer supporters require extensive training, although a clear advantage is their familiarity with probation and parole concerns.

"Selling" the program. A stress program must be promoted among all staff, but, first and foremost, agency administrators must demonstrate concern for employee welfare. Buy-in from middle managers and line supervisors also is essential, as they are in a position to decide whether to allow peer supporters time off. Because unions, too, can either obstruct or promote a stress program, they should be involved in planning from the outset. (A stress program is a major employee benefit.) Line staff should also be involved in planning the program. Participation in a stress program could count toward mandated training hours.

Ensuring confidentiality. Communication between licensed mental health practitioners and clients is generally privileged, but this is usually never the case between peer supporters and employees. To maintain confidentiality, peer supporters should voluntarily follow the same rules as do licensed practitioners. Program administrators will want to consult an attorney about confidentiality.

Assessing effectiveness. Without evaluation it is difficult to know whether a program needs improvement. Evaluation should be built into program design and planning. This allows calculating baseline measures (e.g., stress levels). In an outcome evaluation, which assesses a program's effects, the most compelling evidence is reduced stress.[7]

Providing adequate funding. New programs will

"I have 108 cases right now—I can't supervise all of them by the book—there's no time."
—an officer

Exhibit 1. Program costs

Agency	Annual budget
Washington State Department of Corrections	$558,000 per year; serves all Department of Corrections personnel.
Southern California probation agencies	Varies by department. Agencies pay $60–125 for each hour of onsite response to critical incidents.
Harris County (Texas) Community Supervision and Corrections Department	$38,324, matched with NIJ grant; $34,000 in-kind services ($100–200 per class if peer trainers are used).
Cuyahoga County (Ohio) Juvenile Court	$50,000 in State funds, matched with NIJ grant, to develop pilot training program.
Pennsylvania Board of Probation and Parole	$51,000 initial startup cost; about $22,000 the next year.
California C–POST—State Juvenile Correctional Institutions	$215,000 for training and research (but can be $7,500–8,500 for half- and full-day sessions). Additional costs for employee training during overtime. Reduction in health risk factors is projected to save almost $700 per officer trained.

Note: Costs vary with program duration, types of services provided, number of people served, and frequency of use, among other factors.

have one-time startup costs. Expenses can be minimized through such means as securing in-kind contributions and recruiting university professors as evaluators. Some resources are free, and experienced practitioners are available to help in planning and evaluation.[8] (Program costs for six of the nine programs examined by the study are given in exhibit 1.)

Reducing organizational sources of stress. Because many officers identify their own agencies as a source of stress, probation and parole agency managers may want to coordinate with the stress reduction program, identify the specific agency-based sources of stress for their officers, and take steps to reduce those that are within their control (for example, involving line staff in some decisionmaking).

Agency administrators can tailor programs to their needs. Programs can be conducted in-house or contractors can be hired. Some programs emphasize prevention and others address critical incidents. Some use peer supporters; others use licensed mental health

professionals. Some offer counseling; still others provide training. Of the nine agencies studied, three require or strongly urge their staff to engage in regular physical exercise. In some cases, agencies combine approaches to get as many components of a full-service program as possible.

This study presents a balanced view of the difficult work that community corrections professionals do and the human cost that may be manifested in stress for the line officer, supervisor, and administrator. The study's final report provides insight into the stress their work entails, as well as case studies of approaches to preventing, reducing, and managing stress (see "Case Studies of Stress Reduction Programs").

Notes

1. This report uses the dictionary definition of stress. Stress is a mentally or emotionally disruptive and upsetting condition occurring in response to adverse external influences, and a stimulus or circumstance causing such a condition. It is the body's response to the perception of danger as well as to exposure to a wide variety of stress factors.

2. Faulkner, Richard (Correctional Program Specialist, National Institute of Corrections), personal communication with authors; Brown, P.W., and M.J. Maggio, "The Evolution of Officer Safety Training in the Federal Probation and Pretrial Services System," *Federal Probation* 61(4) (December 1997): 26–32.

3. Quotations cited in this Research for Practice are taken from interviews conducted as part of the study.

4. Simmons, C., J.K. Cochran, and W.R. Blount, "Effects of Job-Related Stress and Job Satisfaction on Probation Officers' Inclinations to Quit," *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 21(2)(1997): 213–229. This figure is likely far higher than among U.S. employees in general, one-third of whom rate their boss as unfair—see *Hudson Employment Report* 1(4)(April 2004): 2.

5. This figure is comparable to firefighters' median annual salary of $36,233. However, it is lower than the $42,270 median annual salary of police and sheriff's patrol officers. Figures are from Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (2000): http://bls.gov/oco/.

6. In Florida, for example, the turnover rate in 1995 was about 30 percent.

7. See the questionnaire used in an NIJ-sponsored survey of stress among police officers, in Finn, P., and S. Kuck, "Addressing Probation and Parole Officer Stress," final report to the National Institute of Justice, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, November 2003: appendix F. Available at www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/ nij/grants/207012.pdf.

8. These resources are presented in Finn, P., and S. Kuck, "Addressing Probation and Parole Officer Stress," chapter 6.

Additional reading

Developing a Law Enforcement Stress Program for Officers and Their Families, by Peter Finn and Julie Esselman Tomz, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 1997, available at www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles/nij/163175.pdf.

Addressing Correctional Officer Stress: Programs and Strategies, by Peter Finn, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice and Corrections Program Office, 2000, available on the Web at www.ncjrs.org/pdffile1/nij/183474.pdf.

Appendixes in the study's final report (see title page) include selected program materials such as questionnaires about stress, a critical incident response protocol, a crisis response intervention guide, stress reduction training materials, and a police officer survey. Access to these source materials is at www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/nij/grants/207012.pdf.

Case Studies of Stress Reduction Programs[a]

The nine stress reduction programs studied vary widely in goals, staffing, operations, services, and other features. Highlights of each program are presented below.

Comprehensive Services—Washington State Department of Corrections

Washington's Department of Corrections[b] learned through a survey that stress among community corrections officers and other employees had increased. As a result, the department expanded its critical incident stress management services by establishing five regional "Staff Resource Centers" for corrections officers and community corrections officers as well as all other employees.

Staff at the centers believe that both mental and physical health are important to stress management. Counselors and occupational nurse consultants participate in critical incident responses, conduct stress management training, promote staff participation in wellness programs, and treat minor stress-related physical problems.

Contracting for Services—Southern California Probation Agencies

Several probation agencies in Southern California contract with a private mental health organization, The Counseling Team, for brief cognitive, reality-based therapy focusing on problems that cause stress and ways to resolve them.

The team offers individual counseling, critical incident response services, inservice training, and peer-support training. The Fresno County Probation Department, for example, opted for peer-support training when stress-related issues arose among line staff, including personnel crises that had resulted in the disciplining of some officers.

"Stomp Out Stress" Among Probation Officers—Harris County (Texas)

Severe budget cuts were one reason the Harris County Community Supervision and Corrections Department developed a stress management training program for probation officers. The cuts resulted in the loss of 500 officers, causing stress even among personnel who were not directly affected.

In the first of four training modules, participants learn about the nature of stress. Because stress is viewed as having both personal and organizational sources, a module was designed for each. A fourth module on communication is intended to help officers discuss stress with their families.

One trainer called the participants "a tough, tough, paranoid audience." Afterward, participants said they believed the sessions provided practical advice. More than half had been "burned out" before training. A month later, burnout was significantly reduced in the same participants. Six months later, some burnout returned but was still less than before training.

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Case Studies of Stress Reduction Programs[a] (cont.)

"Comprehensive Wellness" for Juvenile Court Probation Officers—Cuyahoga County (Ohio)

The "Comprehensive Wellness Program" was established in the Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court in *anticipation* of increased employee stress. The severity of juvenile offenses had increased, and organizational changes had created a climate of uncertainty because several top administrators had been fired. The Court also found job dissatisfaction and high levels of absenteeism, use of medical leave, and turnover.

Each of the nine all-day sessions focused on a different topic. An introduction covered relaxation and deep breathing, physical and mental wellness, stress prevention and management, and healthy lifestyle choices. Although this session was the most "nontraditional," participants said it was the most helpful. Other sessions covered communication skills and anger management, among other topics.

"Almost half. . . [of the participants] have a high overall cardiac risk."

—a trainer

The result was a significant drop in physical and psychological stress among the participants. Almost 90 percent reported favorable changes, and more than 80 percent said they were better able to cope with work-related stress.

Critical Incident Response Team (CIRT)—Pennsylvania Board of Probation and Parole

The shooting of a parole supervisor by an offender led the Pennsylvania Board of Probation and Parole to establish a CIRT program. The board, along with the Office of the Victim Advocate,[c] formed a planning committee whose protocol for a formal program was adopted in 1999.[d] Support staff are included in the program along with officers.

The CIRT process consists of activating the team, intervening, and providing followup. Once activated, the team works with the team coordinator, the victim advocate, and local management to handle the crisis. Of the 31 team members recruited initially, 28 were still active after 3 years. Through 2002, the CIRT was activated nine times, primarily in response to shootings and suicides.

"HeartMath" Training—California C–POST

The California Commission on Correctional Peace Officer Standards and Training (C–POST) created its program when the State legislature asked that a training standard for stress reduction be developed for all correctional peace officers and parole agents in the Department of Corrections and the California Youth Authority.[e] C–POST contracted with HeartMath, an educational, training, and research organization that has provided stress management training for such clients as Boeing and Sony.

HeartMath pilot-tested and evaluated its 2-day standard training with 91 juvenile peace officers and parole agents—all volunteers. They were assigned randomly to either an intervention group or a control group.[f] Emphasis was on physiological functioning, with testing before and after training for adrenal stress, heart rate, blood pressure, and blood sugar and cholesterol levels. Relaxation techniques were the

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Case Studies of Stress Reduction Programs[a] (cont.)

key means of stress reduction taught. Three months after training, physiological variables and psychological and work-related measures improved in the intervention group. Levels of LDL ("bad" cholesterol), heart rate, and blood pressure fell only in the trained group. Fatigue and anger also decreased, while productivity, motivation, goal clarity, and perceived support from managers increased.

Physical Exercise Central—Boulder (Colorado), Montana, and South Carolina

The Boulder County Department of Probation has viewed stress reduction and wellness as a management priority since 2001. The most significant step taken to reduce stress and improve wellness was to encourage exercise on the job. In the health-conscious community of Boulder, the mild climate and proximity to walking and hiking trails make it easy to take outdoor breaks. Every employee is urged to walk, jog, cycle, or participate in any other physical activity during the work day.

Both the Montana Department of Corrections and the South Carolina Department of Probation, Parole, and Pardon Services require annual fitness tests. In South Carolina, the goal was not to reduce officers' stress, but to help ensure their safety, since all officers have arrest powers. The fitness standard, which applies to all probation and parole officers, offers the option of a 1.5-mile run or a 3-mile walk in 1 hour. Thus far, very few of the 200 tested officers have failed. The policy drafted in Montana requires testing of most probation, parole, and correctional officers. Two-thirds of the 78 eligible officers passed the pilot test conducted in 2002. Some found out for the first time that they might have hypertension.

Notes

a. Contact information for each program is given in Finn, P., and S. Kuck, "Addressing Probation and Parole Officer Stress," chapter 3.

b. Washington ranks second nationwide (just behind Texas) in number of people per capita under community supervision.

c. The Board recognized that the Office of the Victim Advocate, because of its experience with crime victims, could be a major asset in planning and operating a critical incident response team.

d. The protocol is included in Finn, P., and S. Kuck, "Addressing Probation and Parole Officer Stress," appendix C.

e. Budget constraints subsequently limited the program to the California Youth Authority only.

f. The control group was trained after the intervention group.

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