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# National Police Research Platform



## Stress, Burnout, and Health

William P. McCarty, Amie Schuck, Wesley Skogan and Dennis Rosenbaum

### Purpose of the Project

Prior research suggests that policing is one of the most stressful occupations. This high level of stress is due to a variety of factors that characterize the policing profession. First, policing is a dangerous job in which officers can encounter violent criminals or use deadly force during the course of their daily work. Second, the bureaucratic nature of police organizations often represents a source of stress and dissatisfaction among officers. Finally, prior research has often looked at the important role of peer support and trust among fellow officers and supervisors in mitigating stress and burnout in police work. Support from within the organization may take on a greater level of salience in the realm of policing, because officers depend on fellow officers to ensure their lives and safety.

Stress and burnout can have deleterious consequences. For the individual officer, stress and burnout can ultimately lead to illness, mood changes, alcohol use, and sleep disturbances in the short-term and perhaps even to cardiovascular disease and psychological disorders in the long-term. Heightened levels of stress and burnout can also affect relationships with family and friends, and hurt officers' overall quality of life. For the organization, research has revealed that elevated levels of stress and associated burnout can increase citizen complaints and lead to rapid employee turnover.

Given the implications of stress and burnout for individual officers, as well as the organization and citizens they serve, a priority of the National Police Research Platform was to measure these concepts. To this end, a 55-question survey was developed to measure stress, burnout, health, stressors, and demographic information among law enforcement officers across multiple agencies of varying sizes.

## The National Police Research Platform

The National Police Research Platform was developed as a vehicle to continuously advance our knowledge of police organizations and their employees and to provide regular and timely feedback to police agencies and policy makers nationwide. In doing so, the Platform is expected to advance both the science of policing and evidence-based learning organizations. This project was supported by Award No. 2008-DN-BX-0005 awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

### Methods Used

Three primary concepts were measured in the instrument. First, the physical manifestations of stress were measured using five items (e.g., Over the past month, how often have you experienced an upset stomach or nausea?). Second, burnout, defined as exhaustion of physical or emotional strength usually as a result of prolonged stress, was measured using four items (e.g., How often do you feel used up at the end of the workday?). Finally, health was measured using five items (e.g., Over the past month, how often have you exercised?).

The instrument also measured the magnitude of various stressors experienced by law enforcement officers. The elements of danger were measured using five items (e.g., My family and friends are concerned for my safety due to the danger of the job.). Bureaucratic stressors were examined using four items (e.g., The rules of the department are applied consistently.). Finally, peer support and trust was measured using four items (e.g., I feel a lack of support from my co-workers.). Multiple demographic questions, including gender, race, and rank, were also asked during the course of the survey.

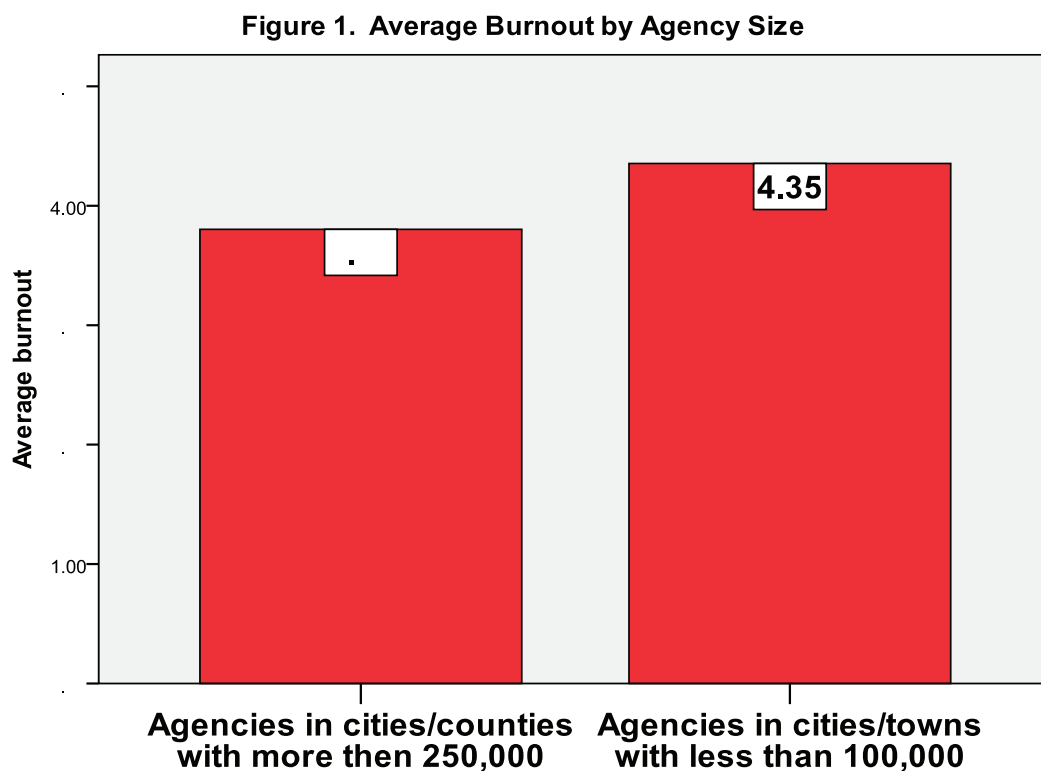
The survey was administered online using Qualtrics. As of December 1, 2010, 11 agencies have completed the survey. Two of the 11 agencies completed a slightly amended version of the survey during a test-run of the methodology and instrument. A total of 1,057 sworn personnel have completed the survey in those 11 agencies. The average response rate was 59 percent. The sample is composed of 862 males and 184 females. Two-thirds of

the respondents are Caucasian (n = 705) while approximately 15 percent are Hispanic (n = 162) and 8 percent are African American (n = 81). In terms of rank, 718 were police officers and 339 were sergeants or above. The average age of the sample was approximately 40.

### Key Findings

For the purposes of the analysis, the agencies were broken down by size. Three of the agencies are located in large cities or counties with a population of over 250,000. The remaining eight agencies are located in small cities or towns with a population of 100,000 or less.

**Burnout.** The four burnout items, each assessed using a seven-point scale from never to daily, were combined into an index ( $\alpha = .809$ ). As Figure 1 indicates, the average burnout (4.35) reported by the 375 sworn respondents in small agencies was higher than what was reported by the 663 sworn respondents in large agencies (3.80). This difference was statistically significant ( $t = 5.03, p < .05$ ).



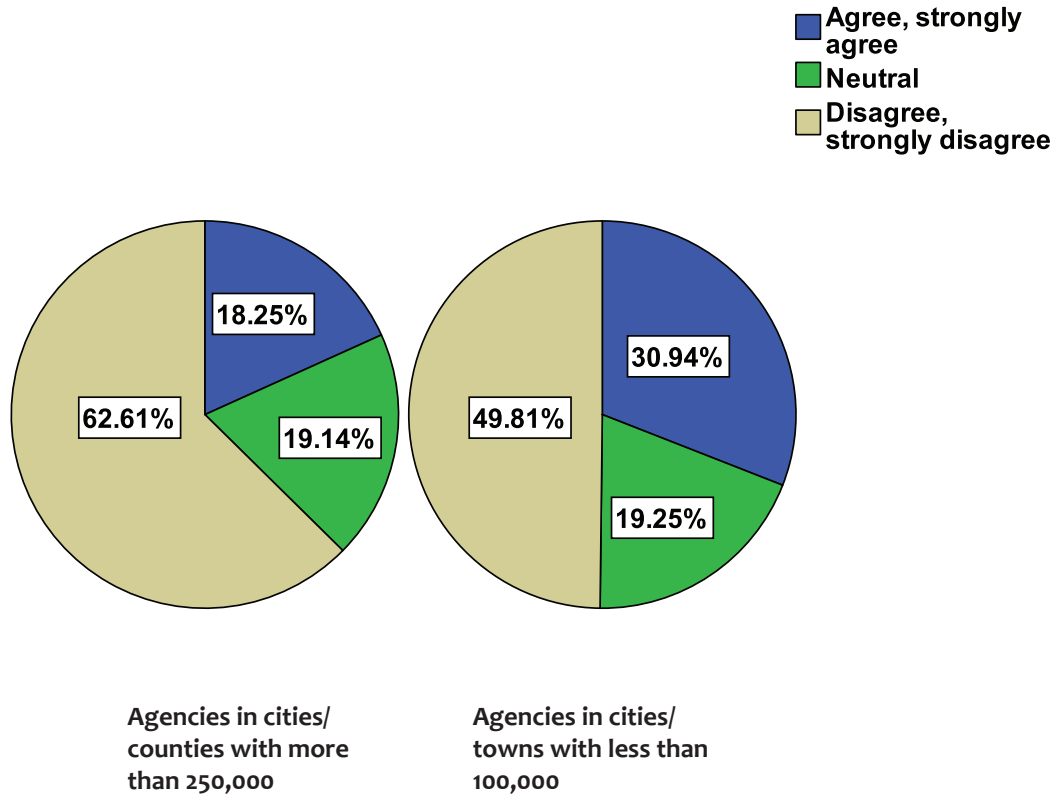
**Health.** The five health items, each assessed using a four-point scale from never to very often, were combined into an index ( $\alpha = .732$ ). The average health reported (2.65) by the 669 sworn respondents in large agencies was significantly higher ( $t = 3.77, p < .05$ ) than what was reported by the 372 sworn respondents in small agencies (2.50).

**Physical stress.** The five physical stress items, each assessed with a four-point scale from never or rarely to very often, were combined into an index ( $\alpha = .903$ ). The average physical stress (2.12) reported by the 371 sworn respondents in small agencies was higher than what was reported by the 654 sworn respondents in large agencies (2.03). This difference, however, was not statistically significant.

In summary, data collected to this point indicate that sworn respondents in smaller departments, on average, are experiencing significantly higher levels of burnout than sworn respondents in larger departments. Additionally, sworn respondents in smaller departments are reporting significantly lower levels of health and healthy behaviors than their sworn counterparts in larger agencies. Further, sworn respondents in smaller departments are reporting higher levels of physical stress than those respondents from larger agencies.

Looking at ways in which stressors vary from small agencies to large agencies may help explain these findings. For example, Figure 2 illustrates the responses to an item measuring the level of trust respondent feels among co-workers. More than 30 percent of the 265 respondents in small agencies agreed or strongly agreed that they feel a lack of trust among co-workers. Only 18 percent of the 674 respondents in larger agencies agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. The variable measuring a lack of trust among co-workers had a statistically significant and positive correlation with both burnout ( $r = .347, p < .05$ ) and physical stress ( $r = .265, p < .05$ ), and a negative and statistically significant correlation with health ( $r = -.247, p < .05$ ). The positive correlation indicates that as the distrust among co-workers increases, burnout and physical stress increase. The negative correlation indicates that as distrust among co-workers increases, health decreases.

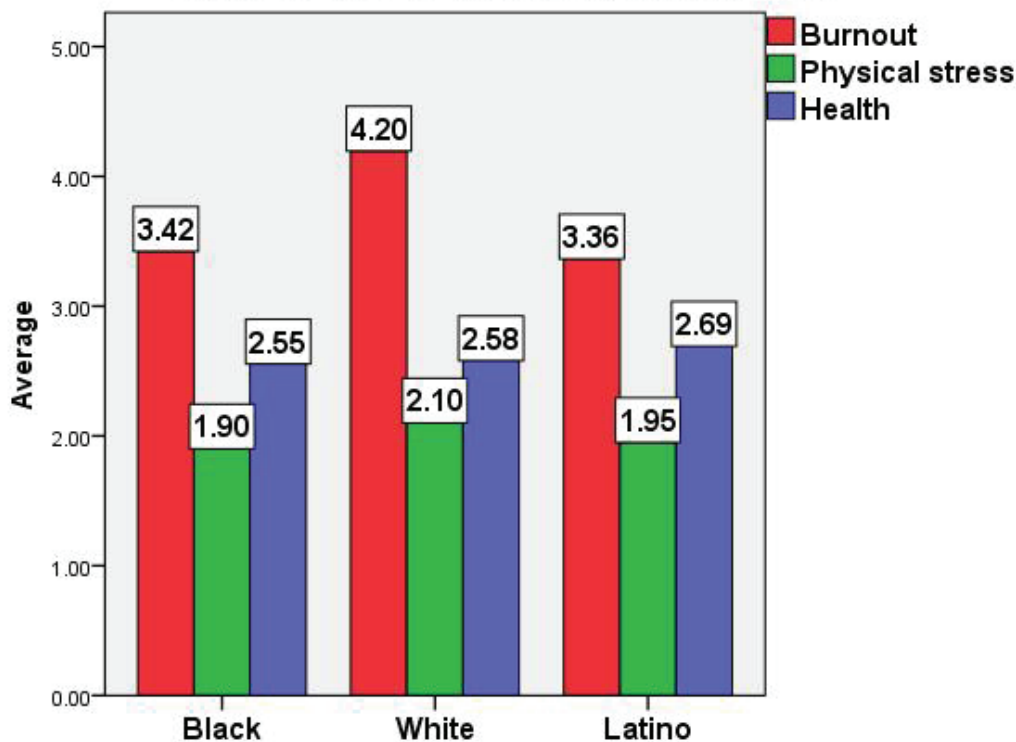
**Figure 2. I Feel a Lack of Trust among my Co-workers by Agency Size**



A significant discrepancy was also found when comparing stressors involving perceptions of one’s supervisor as well as perceptions of danger across large and small departments. Sworn respondents in smaller agencies felt less support from supervisors and higher perceptions of danger than did their counterparts in larger departments. In essence, it appears as if many of the items commonly considered stressors in the prior literature are more salient among respondents in smaller agencies, which helps explain the higher levels of stress and burnout and the lower level of health expressed by those respondents.

Prior research has found that minority and female officers can experience elevated levels of stress. To date, the data do not support that finding. Figure 3 indicates that White respondents actually report higher average levels of burnout and physical stress than Blacks and Latinos. Results are based on 80 Black, 696 White, and 159 Latino officers.

Figure 3. Outcome Variables by Race/Ethnicity



While not shown graphically, the average burnout and health was very similar when comparing the 849 males and 183 females. Females, however, did report higher levels of physical stress than males.

#### (4) Implications for Practice and Future Research

Practically, the results of this survey can assist agencies in diagnosing levels of stress, burnout, and health among their officers. Further, individual agencies can compare their results to other agencies to help further diagnose the extent of the problem. The practical implications of the National Police Research Platform are especially broad given the inclusion of small law enforcement agencies, which have been excluded largely from prior research given their small number of officers. It is hoped that the results of the survey can assist agencies, large and small, in developing solutions to help their officers cope with the rigors of the policing profession, manage effectively their stress, and maintain a healthy lifestyle. One possible topic to be explored in the future is the perceived availability of, and incentives for using, human resources (e.g. counseling services, peer supports), workout facilities, and other stress-reducers.

Assuming the differences in stress levels between small and large departments is a stable finding, future research should continue to explore the relationship between agency size and the various outcome measures. Greater stress in smaller agencies may be due to fewer resources and more work per employee, as well as the closeness of quarters and the inability to “escape” unpleasant work settings. Qualitative research, in the form of open-ended interviews, may also help in understanding why officers in smaller departments are reporting higher levels of stress and other maladies. Future studies may also explore how additional organizational or community factors, other than simply city size, influence stress, burnout, and health. For example, the crime rate in a city may affect the levels of stress expressed by officers. Or, organizational factors, such as those that guide promotion or training, may be strong predictors of stress and burnout.