

# Burnout – an Effect of Professional Stress in the Police Environment

Purda-Nicoară (Netotea-Suciu) Valeria-Liliana-Amelia<sup>1+</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Academy of Economic Studies of Bucharest

**Abstract.** The profession of police officer has been ranked in the top ten most stressful jobs the U.S. (by The American Institute of Stress) and categorized as one of the most stressful occupations in the world (by Michael Pittaro, executive director of The Council on Alcohol and Drug Abuse in 2008, in a study on occupational stress in police), both because of the nature of police work, and because of the multiple influences associated with the work environment (Dempsey and Forst, 2009, p. 174). With this in mind, this article aims to briefly review the issue of exhaustion of the police professional environment, addressing the manifestations of exhaustion (burnout), the causes which generate it, the consequences of professional exhaustion and the prototype of the police officer vulnerable to burnout, so that workers in this field be able to recognize it when stress is present and what it was caused by, and be able to manage it effectively, to counteract its negative consequences.

**Keywords:** stress, burnout, exhaustion causes, consequences of exhaustion

## 1. Introduction

If at first, the police represented the basic unit of the judiciary repressive system, in the modern era, the role of the police organization in general and police duties, in particular, have undergone profound changes, evolving together with the rules of society, so that today they exceed by far the problem of law compliance. Thus, beyond the fight against major and minor crime and law enforcement, the police officer is required to dedicate service to citizens, while respecting the aggressors and the aggressed just as much. He must interact with society without emotional involvement, and calmly and professionally intervene in situations which could generate instability, emotional pain or suffering, situations faced in his current activity. Although these feelings do not belong to the policeman, frequent repetition of these situational scenes with different actors causes a strong accumulation and pressurization mechanism that leads, sooner or later, to overcoming the mental mechanisms of protection of the human psyche of the strongest person invested in the role of a policeman. Therefore, police activity under maximum strain also involves a need to manage both the victims' stress and their own stress.

Frequent social and economic changes in today's society, but also the specific working environment of the police generate new types of stressful situations (unpredictable and rapid change, uncertainty, risk, permanent increase in labor competitiveness, globalization, terrorism, unemployment, living standards oscillation), which challenges the body's adaptability of the workers in the field in a manner that is continuous, and at a faster rate than for other socio-professional categories.

Institutions of law and order and public safety have a critical role in all countries, especially in socially and economically difficult times they go through. As with other institutions there have been major changes (in the role, organization, responsibility and work, the continuous increase of any kind of crime: tax evasion, smuggling, drug and people trafficking, blackmail, murder, theft, etc.) that require increased attention to the current activity, but especially to the staff of these institutions.

## 2. The Stress and “Burnout”

### 2.1. The Concepts of Stress and “Burnout”

---

<sup>+</sup> Corresponding author. Tel. + 40-744-261-016;  
E-mail address: amelia.netotea@man.ase.ro; amelia\_netotea@yahoo.com

Some specialists (Dempsey and Forst, 2009, p. 173) consider that the **stress** is the body's response to internal or external stimuli affecting its state of normality. The term stress has two meanings, being used to designate the body's response to stressful situations and the stimuli that generate stress.

According to other authors (Turc, 2006, p. 66), the stress, this “disease” of our times, is present everywhere in our daily life. Even in a state of relaxation or sleep we face a certain level of stress. Given the ubiquity of this phenomenon, the scientist Hans Selye said that “the stress-free state is called death” (Selye, quoted in Turc, 2006, p. 66). Stress affects people regardless of their lifestyle or the professional nature of the work they perform. To constantly adapt to environmental changes, every human being needs energy and they can consciously intervene in their own existence, to discover their own resources and to develop adaptation strategies.

The specialized literature distinguishes between “good and creative stress” (*eustress*) and “bad or dysfunctional stress” (*distress*), also showing that the same stressor affects differently different persons. It is considered that stress becomes distress when it meets the following conditions, all at the same time:

- it acts frequently and for a long time;
- restoring the body after exposure to stress is always delayed.

Because every human being interacts with the environment in a personal manner, a situation caused by psychological stress can act as an internal resource mobilization factor for some individuals, while for others it may only mean additional effort and wear. Therefore, stress is a psychological phenomenon caused by a combination of objective stressful factors, with subjective meanings attributed to them by each individual.

According to the scientist Hans Selye, response to stress of subjects exposed to it evolves in three stages as follows (Selye, quoted in Turc, 2006, p. 65):

- *the alarm reaction*, including two stages:
  - the shock stage (nervous system depression, hypotension, hypothermia, etc.)
  - the anti-shock stage (defense phenomena);
- *the stage of specific resistance (recovery)*, which includes all reactions caused by prolonged exposure to stressful situations, in which the body's ability to cope increases over the average, and the body seems to adapt to the situation, behaving relatively normally, but with persistent changes in state of alarm;
- *the stage of exhaustion*, which develops when the adaptation can not be maintained, the body's defense mechanisms are ineffective, there is fatigue, hopelessness, there increases inhibition and collapse can even occur, because the affected person can not cope alone with these difficulties, and they require the support of close ones, or the consult of a specialist, which, unfortunately, happens most of the time only at this stage.

The stimuli that cause stress can be physical, mental or emotional and, although they do not cause the disease themselves, they affect the body's defense mechanisms, which can lead to the occurrence of various problems: behavioral, mental (posttraumatic stress syndrome, neuroses, transient situational disturbances), immunological (low resistance to infections, tumors), cardiovascular (hypertension, stroke, brain or heart disease, coronary artery disease), sexual (impotence, incontinence, absence of menstruation) gastrointestinal (ulcers) or even cancer, as recent studies show, problems affecting not only police officers but also their family members.

Most people face stressful situations in their professional or personal life, but certain occupations, among which the police, are characterized by a high level of stressors, not only because of the nature of police work, but also because of the many environmental influences associated with the work environment. For this reason, The American Institute of Stress has placed the police profession among the top ten most stressful jobs in the U.S., and Michael Pittaro, executive director of The Council on Alcohol and Drug Abuse, has categorized it, in a 2008 study on occupational stress in the police, as one of the most stressful occupations in the world (Dempsey and Forst, 2009, p. 174).

The term burnout was first used in 1969 by Loretta Bradley, to name some type of work-related stress. According to some authors (Ginsberg, 1974), depletion is specific to the business, defining the physiological

reactions and behavioral responses caused by chronic stress in competition and sustained social evolution. Most authors, however, share the idea that the burnout is a type of adaptive response to prolonged stress situations, which component includes physical, psychological and behavioral components. Other researchers have defined burnout as a dynamic transactional process that occurs between the individual and his job, with three stages: first, an imbalance between individual and organizational resources on job requirements, which determine, in response, an emotional reaction (anxiety, fatigue, and exhaustion) and which ultimately causes changes in the worker's attitudes and behavior. They also show that in the process of continuous adaptation to the conditions of the workplace, the individual may respond differently, depending on various biological, psychological and social factors, and exhaustion is only one of these possible reactions. Later, Kafry and Pines (1980) used the term burnout to describe physical, emotional and mental fatigue caused by chronic daily pressures (Kafry and Pines, quoted in Oligny, 2009, p. 4).

## 2.2. Sources of Stress in Police Work

Stress does not appear from nowhere, but it is the product of some causes, called factors of stress or stressors. In police work, there are many causes of stress similar to those found in other professions (shift work, poor supervision, inadequate and insufficient equipment), but there are also stressors specific to this activity. In most of the literature on the subject, it is shown that the system itself, public opinion and incidents involving brutality, pain and death are major stressors that policemen must learn to cope with; otherwise serious complications that can occur may affect their performance, both at work and outside work.

Stress can be caused by a multitude of **stressors**. They are endogenous or exogenous mental exciters, with great positive or negative emotional echo, or cognitive or volitional overload sources (thought, attention, etc.), whose knowledge is necessary to manage the effects of stress.

In many specialized works, the stressors in the police environment are grouped into four categories, as follows (Oligny, 2010, pp. 3-6):

### 1. stress factors and *characteristics of the institution's practices owe itself*:

- specific policies and procedures of the institution;
- low participation in decision making, reduced leadership;
- autocratic management;
- poor relationships between superiors and subordinates;
- lack of support from management;
- limited opportunity for advancement;
- injustice felt in practices relating to remuneration and overtime;
- lack of professional and social recognition
- moves without prior consultation;
- fear generated by the internal control department;
- shortage of staff;
- the insufficient and poor quality equipment. These factors can be divided into three sub-categories, as follows:

- i. The first sub-category includes stressors that are related to the managers and management style adopted by them (first four of those listed above). These stressors can be seen as a reflection of the quasi-military institution of the police, the rigid hierarchy, an authoritarian climate, a punitive control system in which communication is established from top to bottom, all of these being able to cause increased levels of stress especially when these administrative procedures are associated with a lack of support from superiors.
- ii. The second sub-group includes stressors that relate to professional recognition (next five stressors in the above classification, reflecting the concerns of police officers regarding their remuneration and social benefits, training, promotion and move). The existence of these stressors is due to some environmental features of the police, as the strong competition that policemen involve into to get a promotion, especially if they have reached a higher level in the hierarchy. In other words, in this environment, professional recognition and remuneration are

based on the grade obtained in all police units, there are many requests for advancement, but few are actually promoted; under these conditions, a common situation in many of the police units is that their workers be limited to execution positions throughout their careers.

iii. The last of the sub-categories refers to insufficient human and material resources and it includes the last three stressors of the above classification.

2. "pressure" exerted by the actual police work:

- teamwork;
- depletion / exhaustion due to work overload;
- wait, routine and periods of inactivity and boredom;
- conflict and ambiguity about the role;
- severe trauma;
- personal security concerns;
- negative repercussions on family life and social life;

3. stress factors coming from the judiciary system:

- difficulty of integrating appearances before the courts in the work program;
- hearings before the courts;
- the feeling that the courts are too lenient on criminals;
- slowness of the judicial process;

4. stress factors resulting from the relationship with the public:

- lack of support from the community;
- public complaints against police officers;
- frequent exposure of police workers to verbal or physical attacks;
- sporadic exposure to intentional or accidental violence;
- the negative image of the media about police work and police officers.

The most common and "harmful" sources of stress faced by police officers in their current activity, as well as various forms of stress caused by the action of such stressors identified by scientific research conducted in the police environment, were mentioned by the same author, in the article entitled "Stressors in the police work", submitted for participation in the 2012 International Conference on Intelligent Building and Management will be held in Bali, Indonesia on May, 26-27. Most often, the authors (Wang et al., 2010, pp. 211-216) are grouped the stressors faced by police officers in their current activity into two broad categories namely:

- *operational stressors*: overload, dealing with stressful situations involving sudden death, working with victims of crime, fatigue, severe disruptions in family life caused by shift work and unexpected overtime, unpredictable and uncontrollable everyday load, due to the justice system as a whole, including the failure of criminal courts, making it difficult to schedule activities, police image with the community, due to both the media and the public;
- *organizational or contextual stressors*: lack of resources, including adequate staff and equipment shortages, rapid changes in the organization, including renaming, reorganization of departments and eliminating positions, failure of communication from managers to the performers, inappropriate practices of supervision and management' support, lack of leadership, management issues, internal investigations, increasing bureaucracy, competitiveness between workers generated by a strict system of promotion and lack of career development opportunities, the feelings of helplessness, worthlessness and lack of meaning, derived from the factors listed above.

The action of these factors can lead to both reduced performance of individuals, because a lot of energy is redirected toward solving the problems generated by the action of stressors, pain and discomfort. Or, according to the same researcher, Hans Selye, "sanctions of psychological stress are unhappiness and diseases" (Selye, quoted in Grigoroiu, 2006, p. 31).

### **2.3. Symptoms of Group Specific Burnout**

Excessive stress can cause damage to a physical, psychological and social level, all these three aspects culminating in the so-called “*nervous exhaustion syndrome*” called “burnout”. People affected by this syndrome may either avoid work and not deal with everyday tasks or become totally involved in work and exclude all other aspects of life; the symptoms seen in these individuals include: intense fatigue, loss of confidence, feelings of helplessness, sadness, dissatisfaction, frustration, irritability, stiffness, anxiety, guilt, refusal to accept the state of exhaustion, denying the decline of their effectiveness, inability to objectively assess their performance, somatization, such as insomnia, headaches, back pain, gastric problems, etc.

The chronic and acute effects of stress in the police environment have been subject to numerous studies in time. Based on a review of available research results, it was established that some forms of manifestation of exhaustion are more common among police officers than in other socio-professional categories, as follows (Payette, 1985, pp. 140-144):

- suicide rate among police officers is 2 to 4 times higher than with the general population; in the case of Quebec, studies have revealed a suicide rate among police officers 8 times higher than the rate seen in the population in the same area. Although research findings on this issue are quite different, we conclude, however, that suicide is a real phenomenon for policemen, being determined, at least in part, by the stress accumulated in different work situations;
- alcoholism and drug addiction are also more common with policemen. According to some studies, the police are up to 15% affected by different types of addiction, including the most common, which is alcohol, and which is both a powerful analgesic in relation to emotional pain and an excellent stress reducer;
- marital problems, separation and divorce are more numerous among the police, they are usually associated with shift work program, which disrupts the normal social life and the family life of the policeman, and the difficulty of sharing the strong emotions experienced at work.
- the unusually high rate of physical illness with policemen, which is traditionally associated with the individual's psychological functioning and, in particular, with their level of anxiety (heart disease, stomach ulcers and back pain).

Also, a study on a number of 130 occupational categories resulted in the fact that police ranks 10 in the top of death caused by cardiovascular diseases, are only a few categories of workers ranking higher from this perspective, among which firefighters. In the case of premature death, police ranks 24 among the 130 professional categories studied. Even more, following the studying of 6.717 death certificates, it was established that 48 of these belong to former policemen, and 69% of the death causes connected to stress are attributed to malfunctions of the circulatory system, like myocardial infarction, and chronic ischemic cardiopathy (Oigny, 2010, pp. 6-7).

#### **2.4. The Profile of the Policeman Vulnerable to Burnout**

We know that policemen are at the end of the control chain, being called to manage situations where all other control institutions have failed. More often than not, to cope with the dramatic and even tragic situations in which they operate, policemen mobilize the best resources available - intelligence and sensitivity, they take over some of the emotions and feelings "on site" and they "store" part of the stress generated by the event, thus polluting their private life, because they can not completely change their role and leave behind the stress of the workday and the dramatic images recorded mentally, when they take off their uniform (Oigny, 2010, p. 3). By the nature of their work, policemen are threefold subject to stress: first, they participate in events that generate extreme emotions and tensions that distort and change forever the lives of those involved, then these situations are repetitive, regardless of the energy involved in their work and they cause a feeling of discouragement when one is faced with a recidivist criminal who displays his pleasure to do evil, and finally, the police have to control their private life invaded by work-related stress, especially since the legal process forces them to remember, to relive and reconstruct the tense situations in which they operate.

In what follows, we will try to portray the kind of a policeman able to integrate work and personal life and overcome the physical aggression required by his job, maintaining at the same time, a psychological balance.

It is considered that those who choose to work in the police have a strong value system and a highly developed sense of duty, designated generally by the expression "to have the calling." Nevertheless, there is argument that mental stress experienced by policemen is directly proportional to the gap between standards of individuals (the representation they have of life) and actual experiences. Thus, studies in the police environment show the following (Oligny, 2009, pp. 6-9).

- the most committed policemen are those whose standards are higher, they are also more prone to burnout than others;
- lower police-oriented employees, i.e. those who have lower personal standards, are less affected by specific internal kneading of the policeman ("Flic de l'interieur") so that they do their duty without leaving the impression that they have adopted an attitude of indifference and neglect towards the work and they do not suffer physical or mental exhaustion that can lead to depression or cynicism;
- moral fatigue and exhaustion occur imperceptibly, without visible symptoms after a period of 7-12 years of police work, particularly in police operations (people working with the public), calling and receiving low feedback from the public, colleagues and superiors about the quality of their work.

Given all this, it can be concluded that the profile of policeman prone to being a victim of exhaustion has the following characteristics: he is idealistic, dynamic, he has a spirit of leadership, he takes overloading, he is fully committed to his work, he uses his time to meet personal and family duties, he has determination, will and an unwavering fairness, he believes that the policeman in uniform helps to create and maintain the image of the institution.

## **2.5. Forms of Professional Burnout**

Although the policeman who is a victim of professional exhaustion is affected physically, psychologically and behaviorally, and there are many signals, exhaustion diagnosis is difficult, from at least two perspectives:

- exhaustion implies a state of crawling whose symptoms are spread over time and are not related, apparently, to each other;
- the policeman tends to isolate himself and to hate "the weaknesses" of his own personality, judging by the signals that do not meet his standards.

Among the symptoms of exhaustion felt by the policeman, according to statistics and existing studies we may include:

- *physical depletion*, manifested by absentmindedness, palpitations, headaches, back pain, flushing, nausea, chronic fatigue etc.
- an *emotional exhaustion*, consisting of loss of enthusiasm and interest in work, even in the case of policemen who love their work; this turning them into introvert, aggressive, cynical people, etc.;
- a *mental exhaustion*, in which the policeman, disappointed with his work himself, faced with a sense of incompetence, inferiority, worthlessness, loses his "sacred fire", he becomes slow in his thinking, and he lacks creativity and blames himself for getting in this condition (Oligny, 2009, pp. 12-13).

According to Evelyne Joss (2008), burnout is manifested in two successive phases: internal exhaustion "burn-in" and external exhaustion "burn-out". The former, internal exhaustion, is generally characterized by presentism. This concept, as opposed to absenteeism, appeared in 1994 and was attributed to psychologist Cary Cooper, who named so the abusive presence at work of the employee suffering from exhaustion, despite the physical and mental health problems which should keep him away from his position. This can lead to a condition of strain, in other words, the worker is physically present at his workplace, but he is unmotivated, tired and suffering from various disorders of somatization (Oligny, 2009, p. 8).

## **2.6. Conclusion.**

The severity of incidents, increasing the frequency of critical situations that require police intervention, the expectations of the community and the immediate coverage of these events make a policeman's profession strongly exposed to the risk of destruction of personality. Therefore, to maintain police forces involved in such missions it is important to turn to post-traumatic psychological debriefing because it has the following advantages: it provides an overview of the event, it reduces feelings of isolation and recovery of memories about the incident, it helps to validate one's own emotions, it protects against rumors, it favors getting feedback from other participants in the event, focusing on the positive aspects of the incident, enabling assimilating a lesson even from a critical situation, etc. (Oigny, 2009, pp. 19-20).

The stressful atmosphere of the police environment can not be changed, as this type of activity will always include tensions. For these reasons, police units are currently seeking to select candidates intellectually and emotionally capable of to fully assuming this task. Also, it is clear that today's policemen should protect themselves against stress and have effective means to combat its negative effects and there should be ways to restore those affected. Moreover, it can be said that exhaustion has a rather high cost, financially speaking, if we consider the investment, in point of finances, people, and time requested by police organizations.

### 3. References

- [1] J.S. Dempsey, I.S. Forst. *An Introduction to Policing. Fifth edition*. Delmar, SUA: Cengage Learning. 2009, p. 174;
- [2] J.S. Dempsey, I.S. Forst. *An Introduction to Policing. Fifth edition*. Delmar, SUA: Cengage Learning. 2009, p.173;
- [3] D. Turc. *Sress and Health in the Work Place*. In: A. Andreescu, Șt. Liță (eds.). Professional stress management. Guide for public order and safety staff. Second Edition. Vol. 1. Bucharest: Ministry of Administration and Interior. 2006, p. 66;
- [4] D. Turc. *Sress and Health in the Work Place*. In: A. Andreescu, Șt. Liță (eds.). Professional stress management. Guide for public order and safety staff. Second Edition. Vol. 1. Bucharest: Ministry of Administration and Interior. 2006, p. 65;
- [5] J.S. Dempsey, I.S. Forst. *An Introduction to Policing. Fifth edition*. Delmar, USA: Cengage Learning. 2009, p.174;
- [6] M. Oigny. *The Police: the Risks Involved in Jobs Governed by Strict Regulations Regarding Crisis. The Burnout Example in the Police Environment*. Available at [www.moligny.com/data/downloads/Papier\\_police\\_michael\\_oligny1.pdf](http://www.moligny.com/data/downloads/Papier_police_michael_oligny1.pdf), consulted on 11/21/2011, 2009, p. 4;
- [7] M. Oigny. *Stress and Burnout in the Police Environment*. Québec, Canada: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2010, pp. 3-6;
- [8] Z. Wang, et al. *A Prospective Study of Predictors of Depression Symptoms in Police*. In: Psychiatry Research, 175(2010) 211-216. Available at ScienceDirect Psychiatry Research journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/psychres](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/psychres), consulted at 10.11.2011, 2010, pp. 211-216;
- [9] M.V. Grigoroiu. *A few General Aspects on Stress*. In: A. Andreescu, Șt. Liță (eds.). Professional stress management. Guide for public order and safety staff. Second Edition. Vol. 1. Bucharest: Ministry of Administration and Interior. 2006, p. 31;
- [10] P. Payette. *On Stress in Police Work*. In: Mental health in Québec, vol. 10, no. 2. 1985, pp. 140-144;
- [11] M. Oigny. *Stress and Burnout in the Police Environment*. Québec, Canada: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2010, pp. 6-7;
- [12] M. Oigny. *Burnout and Critical Incident in the Police Environment*. Available at [http://www.moligny.com/data/downloads/burnotl\\_article\\_ok.pdf](http://www.moligny.com/data/downloads/burnotl_article_ok.pdf), consulted on 06/02/2012, 2010, p. 3;
- [13] M. Oigny. *The Police: the Risks Involved in Jobs Governed by Strict Regulations Regarding Crisis. The Burnout Example in the Police Environment*. Available at [www.moligny.com/data/downloads/Papier\\_police\\_michael\\_oligny1.pdf](http://www.moligny.com/data/downloads/Papier_police_michael_oligny1.pdf), consulted on 11/21/2011, 2009, pp. 6-9;
- [14] M. Oigny. *The Police: the Risks Involved in Jobs Governed by Strict Regulations Regarding Crisis. The Burnout*

*Example in the Police Environment*. Available at [www.moligny.com/data/downloads/Papier\\_police\\_michael\\_oligny1.pdf](http://www.moligny.com/data/downloads/Papier_police_michael_oligny1.pdf), consulted on 11/21/2011, 2009, pp. 12-13;

[15] M. Oligny. *The Police: the Risks Involved in Jobs Governed by Strict Regulations Regarding Crisis. The Burnout Example in the Police Environment*. Available at [www.moligny.com/data/downloads/Papier\\_police\\_michael\\_oligny1.pdf](http://www.moligny.com/data/downloads/Papier_police_michael_oligny1.pdf), consulted on 11/21/2011, 2009, p. 8;

[16] M. Oligny. *The Police: the Risks Involved in Jobs Governed by Strict Regulations Regarding Crisis. The Burnout Example in the Police Environment*. Available at [www.moligny.com/data/downloads/Papier\\_police\\_michael\\_oligny1.pdf](http://www.moligny.com/data/downloads/Papier_police_michael_oligny1.pdf), consulted on 11/21/2011, 2009, pp. 19-20.