

## Police Dispatcher Stress and Resilience

Ryan A. Reddin<sup>1</sup>, Vincent B. Van Hasselt<sup>1</sup>, Monty T. Baker<sup>2</sup>,  
Jean G. Larned<sup>3</sup>, and Laura Southgate<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Nova Southeastern University, Center for Psychological Studies, 3301 College Ave., Fort Lauderdale, FL 33324

<sup>2</sup>Wilford Hall Medical Center, Lackland AFB, TX

<sup>3</sup>Federal Bureau of Investigations Academy, Behavioral Science Unit, Quantico, VA

### *Police Dispatcher Stress and Resilience*

Police dispatchers comprise a select group of sworn and nonsworn emergency service workers who form the hub of emergency response activity. Dispatchers are required to demonstrate a significant degree of initiative, organization, focus, and judgment in responding to emotionally charged individuals involved in a variety of stress-inducing and potentially life-threatening situations. In addition, dispatchers are tasked with conveying information received from callers to officers in the field in a clear, timely, and efficient manner. Although dispatchers are almost never directly exposed to threats aimed at their physical integrity, their work detail is characterized by numerous psychological stressors that vary by degree and intensity. Such stressors may be characterized by inconsistent fluctuations of activity and inactivity, exposure to pain and suffering, encounters with distraught citizens, and dealings with administrative and organizational challenges - all of which are known to unremittingly and inconspicuously wear at the physical, psychological, and emotional health of dispatchers, making the experience of stress inherent to their work (Doerner, 1987; Holt, 1989; Miller, 2006; Sewell & Crew, 1984).

Despite the increased attention directed to the problem of occupational stress over the past several decades, few investigative endeavors have focused on the physiological effects of dispatcher stress making emergency dispatchers a vastly understudied population in the field of psychology. On the contrary, there has been a considerable amount of focus on the phenomenon of “police” stress, or more generally the occupational stress experienced by police officers. A vast majority of stressors experienced by police dispatcher parallel the stressors which are encountered by police officers. According to Miller (2006), dispatchers who receive difficult calls involving pain, suffering, or death may present many of the classic posttraumatic stress reactions and symptoms, including persistent and frightening memories of their ordeal, numbed

responsiveness, irritability, hypervigilance, poor concentration, and sleep disturbance. Others may become overwhelmed and fatigued from high call volume, negative citizen contacts, lack of breaks, work confinement, lack of control, inadequate pay, immediate decision making, role overload, and chronic dealings with organizational conflicts (Medows, 1981; Stratton, 1984; Territo & Better, 1981; Kirmeyer, 1988). Police officers must rely on their dispatcher counterparts to adequately handle dangerous calls and in turn these dispatchers can experience anticipation and vicarious fear after taking these types of calls (Barrett, 1985). Such stressors have the capability of bringing about a slow but steady decline in a dispatcher's mental health - a physiological affect commonly referred to as occupational 'burnout' (Maslach, 1982; Sewell & Crew, 1984).

Police dispatcher stress is a widespread problem which also affects the citizens and communities dispatchers are hired by to serve. Dispatchers who are highly stressed may experience a number of physical, psychological, emotional, and behavioral problems that can impede their ability to carry out their work functions properly. Overly stressed dispatchers may become apathetic and fatigued, which may lead them to ignore or fail to respond appropriately to high risk calls. For example, a dispatcher's performance in answering a routine call may consist of a cursory attempt to alleviate a problem. Alternatively, stress may diminish a dispatcher's judgment and decision-making skill and cause them to overreact and exaggerate their involvement. Further, dispatchers who have become cynical from work-related stress may respond to callers in careless and potentially derogatory manner. One difference is that dispatchers lead a very sedentary lifestyle on the job and are required to sit for hours at a time at their post. In addition, dispatchers are often expected to take on different roles at a moment's notice, including the role of police officer, supervisor, commander or chief (Arbogast, 1989).

Beyond the basic job duties, these individuals have an indirect responsibility to maintain the well-being and safety of other people which altogether comprises dispatcher stress (Bank & Romano, 1982).

It is often overlooked that dispatchers are, for all intents and purposes, the “first responders” at a scene of an emergency. They are the first to pick up the call and ascertain what is occurring and then they take on the responsibility of getting help to the scene as quickly and effectively as possible. The responsibilities undertaken by dispatchers incorporate substantial pressure to perform job duties at high levels of efficiency. People who choose this career come under a lot of stress through the basic job requirements but also, like many other jobs, as a function of the politics which govern their day-to-day responsibilities. The dispatcher population is an important area to study based on the potential negative effects that stem from stressors encountered on the job: including low levels of job satisfaction, high levels of occupational stress, poor health, poor job performance, negative social and familial implications, high turnover rates, post traumatic stress symptoms, and/or maladaptive coping mechanisms in response to stress (Brandt, 1982; Doerner, 1987; Holt, 1989; Sewell & Crew, 1984).

### *Locus of Control*

Studies have indicated that dispatchers who reported occupational stress, in turn, perceived that they had less control over their working environment. In addition, those dispatchers who felt this occupational stress were less satisfied with their job and reported feeling the lack of necessary support to effectively complete their necessary job functions (Burke, 1991). Often times, these dispatchers are forced to deal with hostile individuals as well as people who are in crisis but have no way of providing personal assistance, which can lead to increase feelings of lack of control. Along these lines, most dispatchers do not find out the

conclusion of the calls they dispatch. Individuals who have a strong internal locus of control report fewer symptoms of job burnout, which include symptoms such as emotional exhaustion, cynicism and low levels of satisfaction with their job and themselves (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Such individuals also remain physiologically healthier than those who feel powerless in the face of extreme stress (Kobassa, Maddi & Kahn, 1982). Unfortunately most dispatchers do not have this high locus of control, which in turn leads to lower levels of job satisfaction and higher rates of occupational stress (Burke, 1995).

A study conducted by Burke (1991) found that dispatchers who perceive a lack of control over their working environment report experiencing greater job stress and feeling emotionally more exhausted and over-extended by their work. The perception of lack of control was also related to dispatchers reporting a more impersonal and uncaring attitude towards the individuals they serve. Conversely, their counterparts with perceived control over their working environment reported a higher sense of personal achievement and responsibility. This study supported the direct relationship between job stress and lack of control in the working environment.

### *Type A Personality*

Studies have found that 90% of dispatchers have been found to have a “Type A” personality. This type of personality can be defined as individuals who are more competitive, impatient, and tend to have a preoccupation with time as well as being more aggressive (Payne, 1984). In contrast “Type B” personality individuals are less competitive, more easy-going and patient. When observing dispatchers, one study found individuals who experienced higher levels of interruptions on the job and were extreme. Type A’s often viewed their work as overloading and in response to this took more coping actions in order to decrease the duration, scope and number of demands placed on them. At all levels of interruption, Type A dispatchers continued

to appraise their demands as overloading, even though the objective load was not increased, and they continued to engage in coping behaviors to decrease their work load. The potential lack of psychological salience in these individuals may be one explanation for difficulty in dealing with interruptions on the job. Overall, objective events and personal disposition are components of subjective appraisal of work demand overload in dispatchers (Kirmeyer, 1988).

### *Shift Work*

A major component of dispatcher stress involves the consequences of shift work, especially late night work shifts. Working the night shift has been found to have several physiological effects for these individuals including change in the circadian rhythms for sleep as well as changes in body temperature and gastrointestinal functioning. These long shifts also have a negative effect on social functioning due to the disruption in rhythms of social interaction and family interactions (Holt, 1982). Meers, Maasen, & Verhaegen (1978), studied the effects of shift work and found that employees who had shift work for three years over their peers who changed from shift work to regular shifts after six months, experienced more sleep disturbances, gastrointestinal problems, and higher levels of anxiety.

One important factor that is related to stress, anxiety, and performance in dispatcher is what is called the "time factor". This is defined as the number of telephone or radio calls a dispatcher must handle in a relatively short period of time. Certain shifts are inherently busier for dispatchers than others and involve higher volumes of calls. With the relationship between higher levels of stress or anxiety to number of calls, there is some question as to whether these individuals can interpret a wide spectrum of information in a very short time period. In turn, there is question on whether they lose their ability to judge or discriminate between what may be a minor problem versus what may be a potentially critical situation (Burke, 1991).

Situations that dispatchers found difficult were characterized by themes of uncertainty coupled with communication difficulties and insufficient resources. These dispatchers additionally indicated that skills, knowledge, and experience were regarded as important components to help effectively handle these common challenging experiences. Personal characteristics were also cited as being important when handling difficult situations. Such characteristics include: sensitivity, insight, empathy, and intuition. Emergency dispatchers indicated that in order to cope more efficiently cope with difficult situations a higher degree of guidance, feedback, and education in their work. This was cited as the mechanism needed to increase the sense of certainty which in turn would lead to decreased stressed and better outcomes for both dispatchers and the people being helped (Forslund, Kihlgren, & Kihlgren, 2004).

### *Social Support*

Social support for dispatchers, both on and off duty, is imperative to help an individual deal with stressors; moreover, it has some evidence of moderating the detrimental effects of organizational stressors. Support from a shift supervisor has been found to benefit employees in two ways when work load is perceived to be high. First, supervisor support may improve the consequences of work overload on emotional distress which manifested as feelings of tension, frustration, and irritation. Second, supervisor support could encourage more effective problem-focused coping by increasing the willingness of employees to engage in coping actions to reduce the subjective feelings related to overload. It should be noted that these supervisory support benefits have been substantiated when work load is high but the benefits were not seen when work load was low. Supervisors who exhibited high levels of support for their employees demonstrated higher levels of backing-up their subordinates and giving them credit for difficult

decisions they made and are often less critical of the employees actions. These actions of a supervisor providing high levels of support lead to greater levels of self-esteem in their employees, which could increase the effectiveness of the dispatcher to handle a large volume of phone calls (Kirneyer & Dougherty, 1988).

Lack of social support has been found to play an important role when it comes to dispatcher stress. Those dispatchers with the least amount of job stress tended to have personal contact with close friends outside the work place, a feeling of belonging to some form of social network, close relationships with co-workers and feelings of being able to count on family, friends and co-workers for support and guidance. Those dispatchers who have social support networks at work and outside of work reported lower levels of occupational stress and were at less risk for burnout (Burke, 1995). Social support has often been cited as being a “buffer” because it is a factor which moderates the relationship between stressors experienced on the job and negative reactions to this stress by employees. There is no direct effect between social support and negative reactions or job stressors but it is a medium where the relationship between the two is modified (House, 1981). Individuals who experience high levels of stress and have high social support tend to have fewer somatic or psychological complaints than those with low social support (Martin & Burks, 1985).

### *Job Satisfaction*

Different components of an occupation play into job satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Job satisfaction is related to achievement and recognition, the opportunity for growth and advancement, amount of responsibility, and the assigned work duties. On the other hand, job dissatisfaction factors are extrinsic to the job itself and include: the company’s policy and administrative procedures, supervision, relationships with coworkers, the working conditions,

wages, status of the position and job security. High levels of job satisfaction positively influence an employee's self-respect, which could be a reflection of one's occupational status (Burke, 1991).

Perceived job satisfaction was related to dispatcher's level of stress as well as occupational burnout. Dispatchers who were dissatisfied with their job tended to experience significantly increased levels of job stress. In addition, dispatchers who report dissatisfaction with their pay and opportunity for advancement in their position also reported higher levels of stress and burnout. Stress was also found to be increased for those dispatchers who reported having higher levels of role conflict and a confused sense of loyalty in the workplace. The more complex the dispatcher's role is while at work, the higher their levels of stress. As discussed, high levels of supervisory support are related to positive psychological outcomes for dispatchers, whereas a lack supervisory support serves as a major stressor in the workplace. Dispatchers who have the support of their co-workers report having less psychological stress and burnout. Overall, support from co-workers and supervisors both have a positive influence on a dispatcher's level of job satisfaction (Burke, 1995). It is thought that a lot of problems in police communication centers are due to conflicts which occur between the civilian employees and sworn law enforcement officials (Tarvin, 1982). Brandenburg (1988) found that dispatchers often report not feeling supported by their supervisors when a complaint arises from a citizen or a procedural conflict from officers in the field (Barrett, 1985). The conflicts that arise between dispatchers and officers can become personal and aggressive, and may result in increased stress in the work place (Brandenburg, 1988).

A unique aspect of dispatcher stress is related to their perception of their own job status. It is common for dispatchers to report hearing disparaging remarks from both civilians and

personnel who work inside the department. Dispatchers are in a position of being civilians who are sworn into an organization. They also are physically isolated from other employees in law enforcement and have little interaction with other personnel outside of their own department. Dispatchers sometimes believe they are perceived as “second-class citizens” within the law-enforcement organization and this perception is reinforced by the physical isolation as well as being a citizen who is brought into the world of sworn law enforcement officials. It is common for police dispatchers to have a self-perception of being of lower class within their own department and tend to be quickly criticized by line officers and administrators. These feelings of having low status may be attributed to lower levels of job satisfaction. Dispatchers have feelings of being of low status but also feel a higher level of responsibility to others, which provides another unique source of stress for these individuals. While individuals who are in high status positions tend to report more feelings of depression and strain, overall they appeared to be more satisfied with their job (Burke, 1995; Quinn & Shepard, 1974; Burke, 1991).

An additional significant source of stress which has been cited by dispatchers is the lack of formal training provided. These individuals act as “lifelines” to both co-workers and citizens but often learn their trade on the job. Many jobs require either an advanced degree or formal training; dispatchers find themselves in a high-responsibility job which requires multi-tasking without either. It is very rare for an organization to have an academy and ongoing in-service training programs for these dispatchers. Even if these types of training opportunities are offered it is usually through a private organization that is not associated with the agency. This lack of formal training further decreases job satisfaction for dispatchers and constrains the amount of organizational support felt by these individuals (Burke, 1995). Lack of monetary rewards for emergency dispatchers heightens the stress stemming from status incongruence and overall job

dissatisfaction. In terms of job satisfaction, police dispatchers are on the low end of a number of factors that are imperative to being satisfied with one's job; these being poor training, low status and poor pay.

Personal accomplishment is another factor which is related to job satisfaction. Personal accomplishment includes feelings of competence and achievement in one's job duties. The greater the feelings of personal accomplishment the lower the risk for job burnout as well as lower levels of job dissatisfaction. This higher level of personal accomplishment will help a dispatcher feel a sense of satisfaction and enjoyment from working as well as a sense of the work they are doing being worthwhile and making a positive difference. As discussed above, there is lack of formal training for a lot of dispatchers which makes feelings of personal accomplishment hard to achieve. It is difficult for dispatchers to have a sense they are successful at their job. This is due to a lack of training, which would otherwise provide a more structured and better organized protocol on how to accomplish the sometimes complex tasks which are required of them. In addition, it is difficult to achieve a sense of accomplishment in an occupation where dispatchers perceive themselves as "second-class citizens" in their own workplace (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

The working environment is considered a potentially powerful and efficient mechanism of social change and intervention. In addition the working environment provides a good mechanism for efforts to improve support. Social support helps to diminish the effects of stress, so improving social support at work can help improve individual and organization effects on stress and health. Perceived feelings of being powerless and ineffective is a factor which also leads to job dissatisfaction for dispatchers. This experience can be seen in situations where dispatchers had a more difficult time taking control of and mastering the situation, as well as a

lack of control over the working environment, dispatchers come across situations where they may take a call from someone with communication challenges. As inherently seen in other effective organizations, there are social support mechanisms available that could improve conditions and foster an environment to buffer against effects of stress, which could benefit police communication centers (Burke, 1991; Forslund, et al., 2004).

### **Discussion**

The purpose of the proposed study is to conduct a comparison of the degree and type of operational and organizational stressors that are most predictive of stress in police dispatchers. By identifying the specific aspects of dispatcher duties that cause significant stress, appropriate measures can be implemented to help dispatchers to better cope with such stressors. This pilot study will provide information which may be used in the future to improve our ability to treat and prevent stress-related disorders in police dispatchers. It is anticipated that improved stress management techniques would allow for a lower incidence of stress-related physical, behavioral, and emotional conditions that often impede judgment and hinder work ability.

The present paper's central guiding theme is for police departments to establish, support, and maintain strong continuing education and training programs for all personnel. It is believed that dispatchers, officers, supervisors, and administrators who are knowledgeable with regard to aspects surrounding operational and organizational stress are better prepared to take steps in reducing the incidence and effect of these stressors. Although it is virtually impossible to completely eliminate the occupational stress experienced by dispatchers, we can learn more about it, implement ways to ameliorate it, and build resilience towards it.

## References

- Arbogast, K. (1989). Relief for the frazzled dispatcher. *Law Enforcement Technology*, pp. 30-39.
- Barrett, R. F., (1985). The effectiveness of a cognitive behavioral intervention program in remediating symptoms of stress in a police communication center, *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 46/06-B.
- Burke, T. W. (1991). The relationship between dispatcher stress and social support, job satisfaction, and locus of control (volumes I and II). Ann Arbor, MI: U.M.I.
- Burke, T. W. (1995). Dispatcher stress. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, October, 1-6
- Brandenburg, J. A. (1988). Dispatchers as professional. *APCO Bulletin*, May, 26-27.
- Doerner, W.G. (1987). Police dispatcher stress. *Journal of Police Science and Administration*, 15(4), 257-261.
- Forslund, K., Kihlgren, A., & Kihlgren, M. (2004). Operator's experiences of emergency calls. *Journal of Telemedicine and Telecare*, 10(5), 290-297.
- Holt, F.X. (1989). Dispatchers' hidden critical incidents. *Fire engineering*, November, 53-55.
- Kirmeyer, S. L. (1988). Coping with competing demands: Interruption and the type A pattern. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 73(4), 621-629.
- Kirmeyer, S. L., & Dougherty, T. W. (1988). Work load, tension and coping: moderating effects of supervisor support. *Personnel Psychology*, 41(1), 125-139.
- Kobassa, S. C., Maddi, S. R., & Kahn, S. (1982). Hardiness and health: A prospective study. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 42, 168-177.
- Martin, T. N., & Burks, N. (1984). Predictors of organizational commitment: The study of part-time army reservists. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 25(3), 270-283.
- Maslach, C. (1982). *Burnout: The cost of caring*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Maslach, C., & Jackson, S. E., (1981). Maslach Burnout Inventory. California: Consulting Psychologists Press.
- Medows, R. (1981). Officer distress. *Police Chief*, 26-56.
- Miller, L. (2006). *Practical police psychology: Stress management and crisis intervention for law enforcement*. Springfield, IL: Thomas Books.
- Payne, D. E., (1984). What "bothers" the emergency dispatcher. *APCO Bulletin*, 50 (6), 20-21.

Quinn, R. P., & Shepard, L. (1974). *The 1972-73 Quality of Employment Survey*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Survey Research Center.

Sewell, J.D. & Crew, L (1984). The forgotten victim: Stress and the police dispatcher. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, March, 7-11.

Tarvin, S. B. (1982). *The California Emergency Services Communication Survey Report*. California: Tab.

Territo, L., & Vetter, H. J. (1981). Stress and police personnel. *Journal of Police Science and Administration*, 9(2), 195-207.