

“Occupational Stress and Police Officers’ Competency in Service Delivery in the National Police Service, Nairobi City County, Kenya.”

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ABSTRACT

Occupational stress is a significant concern in policing because of the demanding nature of police work and its potential implications for professional conduct and service delivery. This study examined the perceived influence of occupational stress on police officers’ accountability in service delivery in Nairobi City County, Kenya. The study was guided by the Job Demand-Control Theory and Cognitive Behaviour Theory and employed a cross-sectional descriptive survey design. Data were collected from police officers using structured questionnaires and interviews. A total of 384 questionnaires were distributed, of which 341 were completed and returned, while 12 interviews were conducted with selected officers. A multistage sampling approach combining cluster, stratified, simple random and purposive sampling techniques was used. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The findings indicate that occupational stress was perceived to affect decision-making, procedural compliance, emotional regulation, fulfilment of responsibilities, professional conduct and interactions with members of the public. Participants particularly associated high workload and exhaustion with procedural shortcuts, rushed decisions, irritability and reduced capacity to maintain professional standards. The study concludes that occupational stress is an important organizational and professional concern with implications for police accountability. It recommends structured stress-management programmes, employee assistance and peer-support mechanisms, workload reviews, supervisory training and continuous professional development within the National Police Service.

Keywords: occupational stress, police accountability, police professionalism, service delivery, police officers, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

Police organisations occupy a central position in maintaining public safety, enforcing the law, protecting life and property, preventing and investigating crime, and maintaining public order. Because police officers exercise considerable authority and discretion in their daily interactions with members of the public, accountability and professionalism are essential to legitimate and effective policing. Police service delivery therefore requires not only operational effectiveness but also adherence to legal, ethical and professional standards.

The nature of police work exposes officers to demanding occupational conditions. Police officers may work for extended and irregular hours, respond to emergencies, encounter traumatic incidents, operate under resource constraints, and make decisions in situations involving uncertainty and risk. These conditions may generate occupational stress, with possible implications for officers’ psychological well-being, cognitive functioning, emotional regulation, professional conduct and work performance.

Occupational stress is particularly important in policing because officers are expected to exercise discretion while remaining accountable for their decisions and actions. Accountability requires police officers to act within established legal and institutional frameworks, justify their decisions, comply with prescribed procedures and

accept responsibility for their conduct. Where officers experience sustained occupational pressure, maintaining consistent professional standards may become more difficult.

Existing research has established that occupational stress is an important concern among police officers. Studies have associated police stress with burnout, emotional exhaustion, reduced job satisfaction, impaired performance and other occupational and organisational outcomes (Bhui et al., 2016; Nisar & Rasheed, 2020; Queirós et al., 2020). Kenyan research has similarly identified occupational stress among police officers as an important concern affecting their work and well-being (Oweke et al., 2014).

However, general service delivery and accountability are not synonymous concepts. Service delivery concerns the quality, effectiveness, responsiveness, reliability and accessibility of services provided to the public. Accountability additionally concerns the obligation of police officers and police institutions to explain, justify and take responsibility for their actions and decisions.

Consequently, there remains a need to examine occupational stress specifically in relation to police accountability. This is important because occupational stress may affect dimensions of police conduct that are directly relevant to accountability, including decision-making, adherence to procedures, emotional regulation, responsiveness to members of the public and responsible exercise of authority.

The issue is especially relevant in Nairobi City County because police officers operate within a complex urban security environment characterised by diverse populations, major economic activity, government and private institutions, international organisations and varied policing demands. Officers working within such an environment may experience considerable operational and organisational pressures while simultaneously being expected to maintain high standards of professionalism and accountability.

From a Security Studies perspective, police accountability is important not only for the quality of public services but also for institutional legitimacy, public confidence, human security and effective security governance. An institution whose personnel are unable to consistently maintain professional standards may experience declining public trust and reduced effectiveness. Understanding occupational conditions that may undermine accountability is therefore relevant to broader efforts to strengthen security-sector governance.

The present study consequently examined the perceived influence of occupational stress on police officers' accountability in service delivery in Nairobi City County, Kenya. Unlike studies that examine occupational stress primarily in relation to psychological well-being, performance or general service delivery, the present study focuses specifically on accountability-related outcomes, including decision-making, procedural compliance, professional conduct and interactions with members of the public.

Research Gap

Although occupational stress among police officers has received considerable scholarly attention, much of the existing literature focuses on psychological well-being, burnout, job satisfaction, performance or general service delivery. Kenyan research has similarly examined occupational stress among police officers and its implications for work and service delivery.

However, limited attention has been directed specifically towards the accountability dimension of police service delivery. This distinction is important because an officer may experience occupational stress without necessarily demonstrating poor general performance, while stress-related difficulties in decision-making, procedural compliance, emotional regulation or responsible exercise of authority may directly affect accountability.

The present study addresses this gap by examining police officers' perceptions of how occupational stress relates to accountability in service delivery in Nairobi City County. It therefore extends existing research from the broader question of whether occupational stress affects police service delivery to the more specific question of how occupational stress may affect officers' ability to remain accountable and professional in the performance of their duties.

Objective of the Study

The objective of the study was:

To examine the perceived influence of occupational stress on police officers' accountability in service delivery in Nairobi City County, Kenya.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Job Demand-Control Theory

The Job Demand-Control Theory, developed by Robert Karasek, explains occupational stress in terms of the interaction between job demands and the degree of control workers have over their work. Job demands include workload, time pressure, emotional demands and other aspects of work requiring sustained physical or psychological effort.

Police officers frequently operate under high job demands. Their responsibilities may include responding to emergencies, managing unpredictable situations, working extended or irregular hours, making rapid decisions and dealing with emotionally difficult situations. At the same time, officers operate within hierarchical organisations characterised by rules, procedures and command structures that may limit their control over schedules, assignments and work processes.

The theory is relevant to the present study because the combination of high demands and limited control may create occupational strain. Sustained occupational strain may, in turn, affect officers' capacity to maintain concentration, exercise sound judgement, regulate emotions and comply consistently with professional procedures.

Cognitive Behaviour Theory

Cognitive Behaviour Theory provides an additional perspective for understanding how stressful situations may influence behaviour through individuals' perceptions, thoughts, emotional responses and behavioural reactions. In policing, stressful occupational circumstances may influence how officers interpret events, evaluate risks and respond to members of the public or colleagues.

The theory is relevant because occupational stress may affect cognitive appraisal and emotional regulation, potentially resulting in reactive decision-making, irritability, avoidance or other behavioural responses. These responses may have implications for professional conduct and accountability.

Conceptual Framework

The study conceptualised occupational stress as the independent variable and police officers' accountability in service delivery as the dependent variable. Occupational stress was considered in terms of manifestations such as emotional strain, burnout, anxiety, fatigue, impaired concentration and memory difficulties. Accountability in service delivery was considered in terms of transparency, procedural compliance, fair and timely handling of cases, responsible exercise of authority and responsibility for professional conduct. Stress-reduction and coping mechanisms, including social support, physical exercise, counselling, team building and time management, were considered as factors that may moderate the relationship between occupational stress and accountability.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a **cross-sectional descriptive survey design** to examine the perceived influence of occupational stress on police officers' accountability in service delivery. The descriptive design was appropriate

because the study sought to describe participants' experiences and perceptions as they existed at the time of the study without manipulating the study variables.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Nairobi City County, Kenya. Nairobi was selected because it presents a complex policing environment characterized by diverse policing demands, high population density, major economic activities, government institutions, private organizations and international organizations.

Target Population

The target population comprised police officers serving within the National Police Service in Nairobi City County. According to the police personnel information available to the study, the target population was approximately 10,000 officers across different ranks and units.

Sampling

A multistage sampling approach was employed. The sampling process incorporated cluster sampling, stratified sampling and simple random sampling for the selection of questionnaire respondents, while purposive sampling was used to identify selected senior officers for interviews. The study distributed 384 questionnaires. A total of 341 completed questionnaires were returned. In addition, 12 interviews were conducted with selected police officers.

Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires. The questionnaire included statements relating to occupational stress and accountability in service delivery. Respondents rated the statements using a four-point response scale. Qualitative data were collected through structured interviews with selected officers. Interviews provided additional information concerning officers' experiences of workload, stress, decision-making, professional conduct and interactions with members of the public. The researcher administered the questionnaires in person and remained available to clarify questions where necessary. Interviews were conducted through scheduled appointments.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical and administrative approvals were obtained before data collection. The study received approval from Kenyatta University and the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI), including the relevant research authorization. Participants provided informed consent and were assured that participation was voluntary. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe participants' responses, while means and standard deviations were used where the underlying data were verified and appropriate. Qualitative interview data were analyzed thematically by identifying recurring patterns and themes relevant to occupational stress and police accountability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Response Rate

A total of 384 questionnaires were distributed. Of these, 341 were completed and returned, representing a response rate of **88.8%**. In addition, 12 interviews were conducted with selected police officers. The response provided an adequate basis for describing participants' perceptions concerning occupational stress and accountability in service delivery.

Occupational Stress and Police Officers' Accountability

The study examined the perceived influence of occupational stress on police officers' accountability in service delivery. The findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Perceived Effects of Occupational Stress on Police Officers' Accountability in Service Delivery

Statement	Strongly Agree n (%)	Agree n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Disagree n (%)
Job stress contributes to decreased quality of practice, absenteeism and organisational inefficiency, thereby undermining police accountability in service delivery.	187 (54.8)	132 (38.7)	11 (3.2)	—
Workplace stress impairs an officer's decision-making abilities, leading to errors in judgement and potentially unethical conduct, compromising police accountability.	132 (38.7)	154 (45.2)	44 (12.9)	11 (3.2)
When officers feel overwhelmed, they may resort to shortcuts or engage in unethical behaviour, undermining public trust and accountability in service delivery.	143 (41.9)	143 (41.9)	44 (12.9)	11 (3.2)
Officers experiencing high levels of stress may exhibit behavioural responses such as avoiding challenging situations or neglecting procedural requirements, undermining accountability in service delivery.	121 (35.5)	220 (64.5)	—	—
Police officers may experience stress due to work demands, which may weaken their ability to carry out responsibilities as expected, compromising accountability in service delivery.	110 (32.3)	154 (45.2)	77 (22.6)	—
Occupational stress may influence police officers' emotions, motivation and capacity to reason clearly, thereby impacting accountability in service delivery.	77 (22.6)	231 (67.7)	22 (6.5)	11 (3.2)
Chronic stress among police officers may contribute to negative behavioural tendencies such as irritability, anger and aggression, which may affect accountability in service delivery.	99 (29.0)	187 (54.8)	44 (12.9)	11 (3.2)

Source: Field Data (2024).

Note: The first item contains 330 reported responses rather than 341. The original manuscript also reported a mean of 4.68, which is incompatible with a four-point response scale. The mean and standard deviation for this item have therefore been omitted rather than estimated. The original dataset should be consulted if a complete statistical value is required.

The findings indicate a strong perceived relationship between occupational stress and accountability in police service delivery. For the first statement, 319 of the reported responses were either strongly agree or agree. This indicates substantial agreement among respondents who answered the item that job stress contributes to decreased quality of practice, absenteeism and organizational inefficiency.

The findings further indicate that occupational stress was perceived to affect police officers' decision-making. A total of 286 respondents (83.9%) agreed or strongly agreed that workplace stress impairs decision-making and may contribute to errors in judgement and potentially unethical conduct.

Similarly, 286 respondents (83.8%) agreed or strongly agreed that officers who feel overwhelmed may resort to shortcuts or engage in unethical behaviour. From an accountability perspective, procedural shortcuts are important because accountability requires officers to justify their actions against established legal, organizational and professional standards.

All 341 respondents reported either strong agreement or agreement with the statement that highly stressed officers may avoid challenging situations or neglect procedural requirements. This was one of the strongest patterns observed in the quantitative findings and suggests that participants associated occupational stress with behavioral adaptations that may interfere with consistent application of procedures.

Regarding work demands, 264 respondents (77.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that occupational demands may weaken officers' ability to carry out their responsibilities as expected. A further 77 respondents (22.6%) selected the neutral response.

The findings also demonstrate an emotional dimension to occupational stress. A total of 308 respondents (90.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that occupational stress may influence emotions, motivation and the capacity to reason clearly.

Finally, 286 respondents (83.8%) agreed or strongly agreed that chronic stress may contribute to negative behavioural tendencies such as irritability, anger and aggression.

Overall, the quantitative findings suggest that participants perceived occupational stress as having implications for several dimensions of police accountability, including decision-making, procedural compliance, responsibility for assigned duties, emotional regulation and professional interaction with members of the public.

Qualitative Findings

Declining Quality of Practice

Interview participants described situations in which workload and pressure encouraged officers to reduce the time and attention devoted to individual cases. One participant stated:

“Sometimes the pressure is too much... you find yourself skipping some steps just to get done with a case quickly because you know the workload never ends.” (Cpl 1)

The statement illustrates the perceived relationship between workload pressure and procedural shortcuts. The account suggests that excessive demands may create conditions in which officers prioritise completing accumulated tasks over strict adherence to every procedural step.

From an accountability perspective, this is significant because professional accountability depends partly on adherence to established procedures. Where workload pressure results in procedural shortcuts becoming normalised, the distinction between acceptable discretion and non-compliance may become blurred.

Emotional Dysregulation and Public Interaction

The interviews also revealed the effect of occupational stress on interactions between police officers and members of the public. One participant observed:

“You reach a point where you're mentally tired, and even small complaints from the public irritate you... you become harsh without even realising it.” (SGT 3)

This account illustrates how accumulated fatigue and emotional strain may affect officers' interpersonal conduct. Police officers routinely encounter members of the public who may be distressed, angry, fearful or dissatisfied. Professional policing requires officers to regulate their responses in such circumstances.

Where occupational stress reduces emotional control, routine interactions may become confrontational. Such interactions have implications for accountability because professionalism is demonstrated not only through compliance with formal procedures but also through the manner in which authority is exercised.

Stress and Decision-Making

Participants described the influence of stress and exhaustion on police decision-making. One interviewee stated:

“Exhaustion clouds your judgment. You react by detaining someone just to control the situation, even when a calmer approach could have solved it better.” (IP 11)

The account suggests that fatigue and stress may encourage reactive rather than deliberative decision-making. Police officers frequently make decisions under time pressure and uncertainty. Nevertheless, accountability requires those decisions to remain grounded in law, professional standards and proportionality.

A second participant stated:

“When the pressure gets too high, you see colleagues rushing decisions just to get things over with. Sometimes they give orders without thinking through the consequences.” (SGT 1)

This observation reinforces the perception that high occupational pressure can reduce opportunities for reflective judgement. The issue is particularly important in policing because decisions involving detention, exercise of authority, deployment of resources or interaction with civilians may have significant consequences.

Maladaptive Conduct and Public Trust

The final theme concerned stress-related behavioural changes and their implications for public confidence. One participant stated:

“I’ve seen officers snap at civilians during routine stops, raising their voices or showing irritation over small issues. It creates unnecessary tension and damages how the public perceives us.” (PC 11)

The account demonstrates how apparently minor interactions can have broader institutional consequences. Police officers are highly visible representatives of the state, and members of the public may interpret individual encounters as reflections of the police organisation as a whole. Repeated experiences of hostility, impatience or disrespect may therefore contribute to declining confidence in the police. The finding is relevant to accountability because public trust is connected to perceptions of whether police officers exercise authority fairly, respectfully and responsibly.

DISCUSSION

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that occupational stress was perceived to influence accountability through several interconnected pathways. First, high occupational demands may reduce officers’ capacity to maintain attention and follow procedures consistently. Second, stress and exhaustion may affect judgement and encourage reactive decision-making. Third, emotional strain may contribute to irritability and inappropriate interactions with members of the public. Finally, persistent stress may contribute to organisational inefficiency, reduced motivation and avoidance of difficult responsibilities. These findings are consistent with the Job Demand-Control perspective, which emphasises the interaction between job demands and the degree of control employees have over their work. Police officers operate within highly structured organisations characterised by operational demands, public scrutiny and hierarchical authority. Where demands remain high while opportunities for control and recovery are limited, occupational strain may increase. The findings also have implications for police professionalism. Professionalism requires officers to maintain competence, ethical conduct, appropriate judgement and respect for legal and organisational standards even under difficult working conditions. The findings suggest that occupational stress may make these expectations more difficult to sustain, particularly where organisational responses to stress are inadequate.

Importantly, the findings should not be interpreted to mean that occupational stress automatically causes police misconduct or removes individual responsibility. Police officers remain accountable for their conduct. Rather, the findings indicate that occupational conditions may create pressures that increase the difficulty of maintaining consistent professional behaviour. Addressing occupational stress should therefore complement, rather than replace, established accountability and disciplinary mechanisms.

CONCLUSION

The study examined the perceived influence of occupational stress on police officers’ accountability in service delivery in Nairobi City County, Kenya. The findings indicate that occupational stress is perceived by police

officers to have important implications for accountability, professional conduct, decision-making, procedural compliance and interactions with members of the public.

The quantitative findings showed strong agreement that occupational stress affects the quality of police practice, decision-making, fulfilment of responsibilities, emotional regulation and adherence to procedures. The qualitative findings reinforced these results by illustrating how workload pressure, exhaustion and emotional strain may contribute to procedural shortcuts, rushed decisions, irritability and difficult interactions with members of the public.

The findings further suggest that occupational stress should not be viewed exclusively as an individual welfare concern. Within policing, sustained occupational pressure may have organisational and professional consequences because officers are required to exercise authority, make consequential decisions and remain accountable for their actions under demanding circumstances.

However, the findings should be interpreted within the methodological boundaries of the study. The study employed a cross-sectional descriptive design and examined officers' perceptions. Consequently, the findings demonstrate perceived patterns rather than establishing that occupational stress causes misconduct or reduced accountability.

Overall, the study concludes that strengthening police accountability requires attention not only to formal oversight and disciplinary mechanisms but also to occupational conditions that may affect officers' capacity to perform their responsibilities professionally.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Institutionalization of Occupational Stress Management

The National Police Service should institutionalise structured occupational stress-management programmes across police formations. Such programmes should include evidence-informed stress-management training, appropriate psychosocial support and mechanisms for early identification of occupational strain.

Strengthening Employee Assistance and Peer Support

The National Police Service should strengthen confidential employee-assistance and peer-support mechanisms through which officers can seek professional and psychosocial support. Support services should be accessible across ranks and designed to minimise stigma associated with seeking assistance.

Workload and Staffing Review

The National Police Service should undertake periodic assessments of workload distribution across police stations, units and sub-counties in Nairobi City County. Where operational demands substantially exceed available personnel and resources, appropriate redistribution of duties and staffing should be considered.

Stress-Sensitive Supervisory Training

Supervisors and commanders should receive training enabling them to recognise signs of excessive occupational stress and respond appropriately. Supervisory approaches should combine accountability with supportive leadership.

Continuous Professional Development

Continuous professional development should incorporate decision-making under pressure, emotional regulation, ethical judgement, communication with members of the public and appropriate exercise of police discretion.

Strengthening Accountability Mechanisms

Measures addressing occupational stress should complement, rather than replace, established police accountability mechanisms. Clear procedures, supervisory oversight, complaints mechanisms, professional standards and disciplinary processes should continue to operate.

Further Research

Future studies should employ longitudinal and analytical designs to examine whether changes in occupational stress are associated with measurable changes in police accountability and professional conduct over time. Comparative research across counties could also examine whether workload, rank, years of service, deployment and organisational support influence the relationship between occupational stress and accountability.

Study Limitations

The study used a cross-sectional descriptive design and relied substantially on participants' perceptions. The design provides a description of the phenomenon at the time of data collection but does not permit causal conclusions. In addition, the study was conducted in Nairobi City County and its findings should therefore not automatically be generalised to all police officers in Kenya.

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