



# Sources, Consequences and Methods of Coping with Stress in Police Officers

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## Abstract

The issues of occupational stress are invariably present in social services. The police officer's job is among the occupations particularly susceptible to the consequences of stress in the workplace. Because of the strain arising from the work overload, the style of functioning of the organisation, as well as specific stressful and traumatic experiences, police officers are exposed to cumulative occupational stress resulting in reduced quality of life and professional efficiency and deterioration of their social relations. This article presents the sources of stress in the police, the consequences of occupational stress and methods of coping with stress, among which alcohol abuse is a problem that still needs to be solved. For the first time statistical data concerning alcohol consumption among Polish police officers was presented.

**Keywords:** Alcohol; Stress; Catastrophes; Alcohol abuse

## Introduction

Uniformed services differ from other occupations due to the specific working conditions, as observed by Huntington [1-4]. The police officer's job is invariably tied to occupational stress. In terms of stressfulness, it was ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> out of 60 listed occupations [2]. Police officers at work are exposed to both extremely traumatic situations and accumulation of day-to-day stressful events. We can identify two groups of stressful events faced by police officers. The first one includes those involving violence, where a police officer is an active or passive participant of an act of violence. The other group consists of situations causing feelings of dejection and depression, such as witnessing catastrophes and crimes, especially if the victims are children. Coping with such situation requires constructive and active strategies. Unfortunately, as research has shown, police officers often employ ineffective strategies, of which alcohol abuse is still a major problem.

## Sources of stress in the police force

Brown and Campbell [3] identify the following stressors connected with traumatic events in the police: arresting an attacker, contact with victims of violence, informing families and relatives of the death of their loved ones, participating in court trials and providing security at major events. Other stressful factors include performing dangerous tasks [4], contact with violence or an aggressive criminal [5], the need to use force during interventions and police operations [6] and the number of arrests made [7]. In their daily duties police officers frequently face verbal abuse and disrespect on the part of suspects [8]. An extremely stressful situation is the necessity to kill an assailant attacking a police officer [9]. Severe stress is also induced by the need to attend to cases of murders of suicides [10] or witnessing traumatic events [11]. What is interesting, police officers volunteering to participate in actions involving contact with corpses (catastrophes,

retrieving bodies or parts of bodies) show low stress levels and only moderately raised levels of intrusive thoughts [12].

Stress is particularly increased when police officers themselves fall victim of crime [13], particularly if violence is used. Interestingly, police officers who themselves became victims of criminals show more commitment to their duties [14]. A decline in mental and physical fitness as well as stress are triggered by shift work [15] and a large number of conflicts among residents to be resolved by police officers [16]. Especially stressful and frustrating are situations where dangerous criminals are released by court decisions [17]. According to studies [18] a staggering 35% of police officers experience post-traumatic stress (PTS) at work, while 10% show at least several symptoms of PTS.

The factors due to the specific nature of police work do not act in isolation. Occupational stress may also be generated by the atmosphere in the workplace and the organisational climate. In common with representatives of other occupations, police officers may be exposed to chronic stressors. These include work overload, shift work, monotony, responsibility, unpredictability, equipment shortages and interpersonal conflicts [18,19]. Leineweber et al. [20] point to other sources of stress in the police force, such as severe lack of technical equipment, the need to use obsolete or unreliable equipment, prolonged court trials, unfair court rulings, low pay and poor work management manifesting in conflicting decisions.

Witnessing violence, brutality or even death makes it very difficult to come back home and be a loving spouse and parent. Specific stressful situations frequently faced by police officers may exacerbate personal problems in their private lives. Furthermore, conflicts on the family-work boundary add to the stress [21]. Being aware that the loved one may be seriously injured or die while performing their duties is hardly a stabilising factor in the life of police officers' families. Weekend work, shift work and the possibility of having their holiday cancelled put police officers on constant standby, which reduces the quality of their family lives [22]. Traumatic experiences can also people

close to police officers, which manifests itself as secondary trauma symptoms among police officers' spouses/partners. One of the most common problems suffered by police officer's family members is depression [23].

In common with representatives of other uniformed forces, police officers are often highly absorbed in their work and tend to identify with their role, which may lead to feelings of isolation in their families and consequently add to the experienced stress [24]. This multitude of potential stressors must have negative consequences for the functioning of police officers, their families and the police force as an organisation.

### **Consequences of the occupational stress suffered by police officers**

The great number of stressful factors at work must have numerous repercussions. According to Violanti [25], some of the consequences of police officers' occupational stress are behavioural disorders, family system dysfunctions, suicides and alcoholism. Violanti [26] found that the joint effect of PTSD and alcohol consumption leads to a tenfold increase in the risk of committing a suicide by a police officer. Burke [27] indicates that marital problems occur in families of 37% police officers, which is far more frequently than in the general population. American police officers rank 3<sup>rd</sup> among 130 occupations in terms of the number of suicides [28]. Occupational stress leads to short-term sickness absences [29]. Police officers very often report problems connected with cardiovascular diseases [30]. Stress-related health problems are more frequently observed in policewomen, while an increased consumption of alcohol is more common in policemen [31]. Authors of many studies emphasise that participants of traumatic events show changes in the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis. As established by Pinelesab et al. [32], abnormal cortisol levels may be used to predict the emotional consequences of potentially traumatic events in police officers.

Among the organisational effects of stress in police officers is an increased risk of occupational burnout [33] and a reduced job satisfaction [34]. The visible results of stress in police officers are coming late for work, reduced efficiency, unkempt appearance and reluctance to take on responsibility [35]. When exposed to considerable stress, officers may leave the police force [36]. The numerous consequences of occupational stress are moderated by means of coping strategies.

### **Stress and alcohol in the police force**

A literature review indicates that severe occupational stress compounded by lack of support from colleagues and superiors lead to an increased consumption of alcohol in workers, who want to reduce the tension. Many studies suggest that police officers tend to abuse alcohol more frequently than other occupations [37-39]. Some studies, however, point to the absence of differences in the amount of alcohol consumed by police officers and representatives of other occupations [40]. Studies conducted by Brown and Campbel in the 1990s [41] showed that 25% of American police officers had an alcohol problem. Over a period of 20 years that percentage decreased to 18.1% [42]. The percentage of alcohol-abusing police officers is somewhat lower in Norway (slightly below 18%) but 10% declare that alcohol helps them release the stress [43]. A far higher percentage of police officers (31%) regularly consume alcohol in India [44]. In Australia 30% of police officers admit drinking alcohol in risky or harmful quantities [45].

Alcohol abuse by police officers as a method of stress reduction stems from many factors. These include conflicts with superiors, organisational injustice, lack of support, punishment for even the slightest misdemeanour, insufficient rewards and low morale. What is interesting, the aforementioned factors are more frequently named as the cause of alcohol abuse than contact with violence, which is an inherent part of the job [46]. Being a member of the highly bureaucratic, paramilitary force the reduce the sense of individuality and being in control, which is not experienced to an equal degree by private sector employees. Of course, experiencing PTSD may lead police officers to abuse alcohol to relieve the symptoms. Unfortunately, the use of alcohol as a method of coping with stress is too often tolerated in the police force [47]. Beehr et al. [48] attribute alcohol abuse among policeman to the effect of police subculture. Longitudinal studies show that the amount of alcohol drunk increases over the course of police training, which may serve as a good example of the effect of the police organisational culture [49].

Occupational stress, depression and poor interpersonal relationships are the factors largely contributing to dangerous alcohol abuse by police officers [50]. Symptoms of depression are far more frequently observed in police officers than in the general population [51]. Unfortunately, the problem of alcohol abuse in the police force is yet to be solved.

### **Coping with stress in the police force**

Coping with stress is one of the key competences in the police officer's job. Researchers have devoted much attention to identifying the most effective coping strategies [52]. The literature available on the subject describes the methods of coping with stress in detail, so the following part presents only selected results concerning the group of police officers.

Social resources and guanxi (a long-term positive relationship between people) effectively protect police officers against stress and occupational burnout [53]. Police officers displaying severe PTSD symptoms complain of a low level of support [54]. Emotional support from colleagues, friends and spouses is a trauma-reducing factor in police officers [55].

Violanti [56] found that high levels of stress during police academy training leads to ineffective methods of coping with stress (e.g. avoidance), of which alcohol consumption is one of the most common. Pasillas et al. [57] found that the use of avoidance strategies for coping with stress increases the experienced psychological stress in police officers. Strategies based on avoidance are considered the least effective, and yet such a strategy is the most consistent with the police subculture [58].

Inability to express emotions well, inadequate efforts to seek specialist assistance, social reclusion and self-criticism are the aspects of police subculture that result in non-adaptive behaviour of police officers. Inability to cope with stress efficiently leads to a higher intensity and frequency of experiencing stress by police officers [59,60]. The use of active strategies of coping with stress is linked to a greater job satisfaction, whereas the use of avoidance strategies—to an exacerbation of work-home conflict and psychosomatic symptoms. Non-adaptive methods of coping with stress adopted by police officers include drug abuse, smoking, overeating and promiscuity [61]. According to some estimates ca. 10% of police officers take drugs in certain situations [62]. Alcohol abuse by police officers as a method of

coping with stress presents a serious problem which, judging by its scale, is not likely to be resolved in the near future.

## Methods

### Data source

In order to define the level of alcohol consumption among Polish police officers the author of the study cooperated with the National Police Headquarters. Research data from the last 3 years was collected from 16 regional police headquarters, 5 police academies and the National Police Headquarters. All data was encrypted in order to maintain anonymity of each participating unit. The survey included questions concerning extraordinary incidents that occurred during the reference year, among those there were questions concerning alcohol abuse. All data that was accepted for publication was presented in Tables 1-3.

### Results

All collected data showed how many extraordinary incidents that occurred during the last 3 years and included cases of driving under the influence of alcohol, collisions and accidents perpetrated by police officers both whilst on and off duty and under the influence of alcohol (Table 1).

	2013	2014	2015
Extraordinary incidents	5269	5633	5367
Incidents that occurred under the influence of alcohol	232	212	158

**Table 1:** The overall number of extraordinary incidents that occurred among Polish police officers under the influence of alcohol in the years 2013-2015 coupled with the incidents that occurred under the influence of alcohol.

In 2015 there were 5367 extraordinary incidents involving both police officers and civilian police workers. In relation to 2014 there was a 4.7% drop in the number of incidents (266 less than in 2014).

There was also a drop in the number of extraordinary incidents among police officers who were under the influence of alcohol. In 2015 there were 158 incidents of the aforementioned type thus 54 less than in 2014 (25.5% drop). It should be noted that even if the number of extraordinary incidents does not drop significantly, there is a visible and significant drop in the number of extraordinary incidents whilst under the influence of alcohol. That result is an outcome of the increased service discipline and training courses.

Many of the extraordinary incidents are directly connected to road safety. When a police officer is involved in a traffic accident, he or she must take a mandatory sobriety test (Table 2).

	2013	2014	2015
Traffic accidents	2567	2248	2026
Traffic accidents that occurred whilst under the influence of alcohol	119	107	68

**Table 2:** Traffic accidents in 2013-15.

Incidents that involved road safety were the most numerous and concurred to 38% of all reported incidents. In overall there were 2026 road accidents reported, 68 of which occurred under the influence of alcohol.

The 2015 traffic accident survey points out that there was a 10% drop in the number of accidents in that category alone.

In 2015 there were 68 traffic accidents that involved police officers who were under the influence of alcohol which was a 36% drop (39 accidents less) in relation to the previous year.

In 2015 there were no traffic accidents that occurred on duty whilst driving a patrol car and under the influence of alcohol. However, there were 23 traffic accidents that involved police officers driving private cars off-duty and under the influence of alcohol and 45 incidents of driving a private car whilst under the influence of alcohol. In overall 2026 traffic accidents that occurred in 2015 involved as follows:

- 1576 traffic accidents and collisions caused by both police officers and civilian workers driving patrol and service cars.
- 405 accidents and collisions caused whilst driving private cars (23 of which occurred under the influence of alcohol),
- 45 accidents of driving a private car under the influence of alcohol.

Incidents such as being on duty whilst under the influence of alcohol also contributes to the overall number of extraordinary incidents. Being on duty whilst under the influence of alcohol is another category of incidents which contributes to the negative image of the Police (Table 3).

	2013	2014	2015
Cases of police officers being on duty whilst under the influence of alcohol	65	51	51
Cases of civilian workers at work whilst under the influence of alcohol	11	17	8

**Table 3:** Incidents of being on duty whilst under the influence of alcohol in 2013-2015.

In 2015 there were 51 cases of police officers who were on duty whilst under the influence of alcohol or after consumption of alcohol and 9 cases of civilian workers being at work whilst under the influence of alcohol.

Revelation of aforementioned incidents is a direct result of policies adopted by the Police administration and include instructions to improve the surveillance during briefings and conduct sobriety tests. Extraordinary incidents that involve police officers on duty whilst under the influence of alcohol have a tremendous negative impact on the image of Police therefore it is imperative to continue all attempts to prevent them from occurring. In order to do so it is necessary to take preventive actions against all police officers and civilian workers by checking their readiness to both work, duty and conducting psychophysical checkups. When there is a justified doubt that a certain individual is not sober it is necessary to conduct a checkup and if aforementioned individual is found to be under the influence of alcohol it is vital to take a course of action that will relieve him or her of duty and then proceed with proper legal actions. Incidents of being on duty whilst under the influence of alcohol are not on the rise.

## Conclusion

The job of a police officer is inherently linked to a high exposure to stressful events. The large number and chronic occurrence of such events compounded by insufficient personal or organisational resources has a negative effect on police officers, their loved ones and the police force as an organisation. Police officers may adapt different forms of coping with stress. If adaptive methods are used, the consequences of occupational stress can be reduced. Unfortunately, as the cited studies suggest, alcohol abuse is an extremely common method used by police officers to cope with stress, carrying with it further negative consequences, such as problems at work or a declining quality of family life. All of conducted analyzes have shown the scale of alcohol problems in Polish Police. Incidents are not on rise but still prove to create a problem and lower the general effectiveness of the whole formation. Therefore, it is necessary to monitor the problem continuously, develop methods for reducing occupational stress and teaching police officers adaptive methods of coping with stress.

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