The Effects of Police Work on Family Life

By Mercedes Spicer
Abstract

The job of a police officer is full of stressors, and these stressors can have an effect not only the police officer, but on the officer’s family as well. The main stressors police officers have to deal with are violence, time management, promotion, education, finances, and many different emotions. All of these stressors can lead to a disaster without proper treatment to diffuse the stress. Some ways that officers can get help is by having a religion, going to therapy, talking to a chaplain, and there are even several different ways that the spouse can help the officer dealing with stress.
Introduction:

The life of a police officer can be overly stressful and demanding. The decision to become a police officer takes a lot of courage, strength, and thought. Police officers have one of the highest suicide rate and the second highest divorce rate (Heibutzki 2015). People wanting to become police officers need to be open and understanding. The jobs and horrific images that police officers see can affect them in many different ways and in a lot of different aspects of their lives. The pressures of this kind of career can break some people and destroy their lives. The stresses of the jobs are different for each officer, but one of the most important stressor is the violence of the crimes they have to deal with. Officers have to deal with many different aspects of humans that most people will do not see; pain, violence, abuse, none of it is pretty and the stress can affect police officers emotionally and physically. It can affect their lives, jobs, relationships, and it can even affect their families. Police officers have to learn to live with tragedy (James & Nelson 1975).

A police officer does not have an easy life with everything they have to see and deal with, but it can be said that it is harder to be married to a police officer. About fifty percent of spouses report that their relationships have been impaired by the stress of police work (Karaffa, Openshaw, Koch, Clark, Harr, & Stewart 2015). It may even be harder for the family of the officer than it is for the officer himself. Police officers may have to deal with the ugly side of humanity, but the affect that it has on the police officer is what the family and spouses have to deal with. It can be harder on the family and spouses because they did not choose this kind of lifestyle for the officer, the officer chose this career and some families and spouses cannot deal with it (James & Nelson 1975). Families have to deal with the constant worry about whether or not the officer will return home safe and sound, the possibility of the officer not being home on
time and hearing the phone ring or a knock on the door and thinking it could be about the death of their loved one. It is not easy loving a police officer when there is so much to worry about. It can be scary kissing him goodbye in the morning and not knowing if that is the last time you will see him. It is hard and emotionally demanding. There are so many emotions that a spouse may feel about their loved one being a police officer: worry for if he is coming home or if he gets hurt, anger for putting himself in danger every day as long as he is an officer, but a spouse can also be proud of the strength he has for putting himself out there every day and love for the man that he is able to be; there are always negative and positive feelings, but it is important for relationships to have positive feelings that are the most dominate and strongest (James & Nelson 1975).

Being a police officer can change a person, in a negative or positive way, and these changes will affect everything in their lives, including their family. New officers change in the way they see themselves; some may now think they have more power and control of people, and this can affect their relationships with their family because they carry the traits from the job to home (Karaffa, Openshaw, Koch, Clark, Harr, & Stewart 2015). New officers have not yet seen the violence and pain of this career, but after the first death scene they come across it can hit them hard. It can cause them to become closed off and this can affect the family because the family members feel useless because there is nothing they can do to help. With new officers, there are older officers and these officers may feel threatened; which can cause them to be moody and offensive towards everyone, but the easiest people to take it out on would be the ones they have waiting for them at home (James & Nelson 1975). When police officers are upset, mad, or angry they cannot take their frustrations out on people at work or with citizens because it can cost them their job, but at home it is easy to take out everything they are feeling on their spouses,
kids, family, or friends because it does not jeopardize their career. The changes police officers go through are hard on the family because they cannot help the officer unless the officer is willing to allow them to help.

Many people do not understand the stressors of the job as a police officer. People do not know the things officers have seen, done, or felt, so it may be hard to relate and understand what they are going through. It can also be hard to understand why someone would choose to marry a police officer when their life is always on the line, the secrets they have to keep, the late hours, missing holidays, the list can go on. There is so much about the job that can cause one to not want to be a police officer or to even marry one, but there are ways to work out the problems that may arise in police officer relationships. It is important to understand the stress that police officers and spouses go through so that people understand why they may act the way they do and why they should be respected for the things they do for the society. Without police officers doing their jobs and protecting citizens the world would be in chaos, similar to the movie Purge—where people just murder and steal whatever they want all the time with no one to stop them.

Police officers are society’s line of defense; therefore, it is important to understand what they go through and to try and help them with their problems, like they help society.

In this paper I want to analyze the some of the stressors that a police officer faces and how it can affect the police officer and their families, more importantly the spouse. The main stressors I want to focus on are how promotions can cause more work on an officer or lack of promotion can stress an officer out due to money problems, how extra education can strain relationships because officers will have less time with family due to having to work and then go to class—leaving very little time to socialize, how time constraints can affect the family because an officer may be called in when off duty or on vacation and the family may have to cancel plans
and how working on holidays can fracture the home life, how the threat of newer officers can push out older officers because new officers are typically young and more athletic, how keeping information about jobs, such as undercover work, from their spouse can cause a rift in the marriage, how emotional states like grief, constant worry, danger and fear can affect the lives and personalities of the officers and families, and how losing a case—such as the offender gets away or is let off due to lack of evidence, or even losing a person when trying to protect them can damage an officer’s pride and cause the officer to react badly. I will provide advice on how to cope with the stress and how to keep stress from affecting the family and spouse. I intend to complete this research by reading books and respected articles published on the stresses of the law enforcement careers and books published about the life of being a police officer’s wife, and some blogs created by police officer’s spouses giving advice to help other law enforcement couples deal with the stresses of the job and affects it may have on marriages.

**Stress**

Most people encounter stress in their lives; however, police officers tend to encounter more stress with their line of work. The type of stress that police officers face can have many different types of effects on the police officer and on his family. There are many different things that can cause a police officer stress at work and at home.

Stress at work can come from the violence they have to deal with, the work shifts they have that may not allow them to see their family, overtime, fighting with other officers, losing or not solving a case, having to hold in their emotions while they work, and there are so many other stressing factors they have to deal with.

Female police officers have to deal with the same stress factors as male police officers, but since law enforcement is known as a male dominant working place it can be harder for
females to fit in. At work females may also have to deal sexual harassment from coworkers, disrespect from the public because people may think she is not superior, and may have less of a chance for promotion over men (Kutz 2012). Females may not have the same support from their families as males because of religion or traditions, the family may expect the females to have a family or be a housewife (James & Nelson 1975). They may feel a burden of being expected to cook and clean the home once they get home from work.

Stress at home can develop in many ways. Police officers often bring work home which can cause disputes between spouses. If the officer has a spouse then it can cause more stress because they are not able to see each other often, or the officer has to miss a social gathering or event due to the police officers work. Stress can also come from the control a police officer may feel they need to exert in the home with the spouse and children if they have any.

**Time Management**

One of the big factors that can cause a police officer stress and strain on the family is the lack of time the police officer may have for their family. Police officers are on the clock twenty-four seven which can cause a lot of problems at home (Haines 2003). Police officers can be called in anytime they are needed, whether they are on a day off, on holiday, or even for vacation. This could cause stress and strain on the family because the police officer would have to miss many important events, such as holidays. There would be even more stress if the family has children because then the officer could miss important events the child may have, such as award ceremonies, sporting events, and etc (Torres & Maggard 2003).

The work shift an officer has can also affect their time-management and home life, especially if the officer works the night shift for families. Work shifts can cause families to have less time to spend together if they have opposite shifts. It would also be hard for the police
officer because they work their shift and then go home to relax or catch up on sleep before they have to go back to work for another long shift. If the officer had children and worked the night shift it would cause problems with the family because the officer would not often have time to spend with the children because he would be at work when they were home and they would be at school when he was home (Karaffa, Openshaw, Koch, Clark, Harr, & Stewart 2015).

Overtime can create stress and strain on the family because there would again be less time to spend with the family. The officer may have to cancel dates, events, other social outings that had been made, or even leaving their spouse at home waiting for them because the officer had to stay late at work because of a case or some other work related problems (Karaffa, Openshaw, Koch, Clark, Harr, & Stewart 2015). It would also be a problem if the officer was at an event or get together with their family and was called in to work, which could cause some embarrassment.

**Promotion**

It is hard for many police officers to get promotions because there are so many officers and so few higher positions. Waiting or trying for a promotion can be stressful for the officer and their family. The officer has many different problems to face when trying to get promoted. They have to deal with more experienced officers, newer officers they may be in better shape, or the officer may not have enough qualifications or education to be promoted (James & Nelson 1975). All of this can make the officer more stressed and more likely to take it out on people and it would be easiest for the officer to take out their problems on their loved ones since they would be around and it would not affect their job in anyway (James & Nelson 1975).

**Education**
Education can play a big role in an officer’s life. It could be the difference between getting a promotion or moved into a different unit. However, education can be timely and costly causing problems with the family. With the officer working and trying to have an education at the same time would leave the officer with very little time to do anything else. They would be busy all the time and not have much time to spend with family and friends, and probably would not even have enough time to sleep (James & Nelson 1975). Lack of time with family and sleep would also cause strain in the home life. Education possibly will cause more stress for the family due to finances (Karaffa, Openshaw, Koch, Clark, Harr, & Stewart 2015). Police work is not a high paying job and with children it may be hard to raise a family with a police officer’s salary. Education can stress the police officer even more if they have a hard time passing the courses.

**Rookie Officer**

Officers just starting out are not use to the lifestyle of being a police officer (Torres & Maggard 2003). They may not be used to the long hours and the violence they have to face all the time. It could completely change a person to have to face the violence that they may have never seen before (James & Nelson 1975). When new officers are just starting out they can develop the “James Wayne Syndrome” which is where they use swagger, tough talk, and their badge to show that they are superior (James & Nelson 1975). Officers have to be calm and cool when on the job, they cannot let their emotions get the best of them, and this could be a foreign concept for a new officer. In many different studies it has been shown that new police officers often go through a personality change and may start to block off all their emotions to deal with the stress and violence of the job (Karaffa, Openshaw, Koch, Clark, Harr, & Stewart 2015). New police officers also have to go through rigorous training just to attempt to become an officer (Torres & Maggard 2003). It is hard work and takes a lot of effort.
Training to be a police officer or just starting out as a police officer is stressful to the officer and family. It could be a new type of culture for both the spouse and the family (Torres & Maggard 2003). They do not know how the lives of police officers are and how hard it will be to keep a stable relationship. They are not prepared for the hours, emotions, personality changes, and missing of events that will result from becoming a police officer (Torres & Maggard 2003). It is a new environment, which in its self is a stressor. New officers go through “reality shock” after leaving the academy and facing their first crime scenes (James & Nelson 1975). They have to experience and see how police work is actually done and how different it is compared to the training they had received in the academy (James & Nelson 1975).

**Veteran Officer**

Experienced police officers can be stressed just because they have been doing the job for so long. It would be hard to have to deal with the violence day in and day out for years and not have it affect them (James & Nelson 1975). Older officers may have a harder time getting promoted with newer and possibly stronger officers coming into the field every day. Experienced officer may know how to do the job and hide their emotions, but it would be hard to do the job for years and not have it affect their home lives. It may cost them their marriage, children, or even family. However, experienced officer should have more of a chance of being less stress in the home because their family might be accustomed to police culture. Plus the older officer may be able to pick their shifts and be able to find more time to spend with their family.

**Finances**

Another important factor that can cause a lot of stress for an officer and families is finances. In today’s society most families need to have two jobs just to get by, and police officers do not have a high pay, especially when they are just starting out (Karaffa, Openshaw, Koch,
Clark, Harr, & Stewart (2015). There are many ways finances can be a stressor: trying to buy a house, car payments, education, and it would especially stressful if the officer had children. If an officer is male, finances can be really stressful if the spouse has to get a job to help take care of their home or children because males typically feel like it is their responsibility to take care of the family (Karaffa, Openshaw, Koch, Clark, Harr, & Stewart, 2015). Low salary can also cause more stress because an officer may have to work two or more jobs just to try to take care of their family.

Officers perusing education to further their career can be stressed out by finances because extra education can be costly if the department is not able to help pay for it. Finances can also be problematic for officers that have children. It can be especially expensive having to pay for sporting events or extra-curricular activities, and this could be stressing due to having less money to pay for such luxuries.

**Emotions**

Police officers are required to keep their emotions in check. They go through training to prepare them for the scenes and emotions they may face in the field, but nothing can compare to actually feeling and seeing the horror in person (James & Nelson, 1975). Another form of training police officers go through is to learn how to be suspicion of other people. However, this can get out of hand because it can cause officers to be overly suspicions and to lose faith that there are any good and honest people left in the world (James & Nelson, 1975). The loss of faith in humanity and always being suspicions of everyone can make an officer trigger happy and endanger everyone around them (James & Nelson, 1975).

“Heart trouble” is another problem that officers face. “Heart trouble” is where the officer hardens their heart and closes off all their emotions to deal with the pain and violence of the job
(James & Nelson 1975). Officers block off their emotions to be able to effectively do their job without breaking down or freaking out. However, this can have a negative effect because officers began to think of the bodies as “one less man” and lose their sense of compassion for other people (James & Nelson 1975). This could also lead to a lack of communication between the officer and their spouse.

After being on the job for a while some officers began to develop prejudices (James & Nelson 1975). They can no longer see a person as an individual, but instead see people in groups of stereotypes or ethnical groups. When they are constantly running into the same kind of people they just start grouping everyone together, such as snobby, rich, teenagers (James & Nelson 1975).

Officers also have to deal with the frustration of having to face the failure of the court system when an offender is let go or receives a light sentence (James & Nelson 1975). The officers do their job to apprehend the criminals and get them off the street only to have the court system let them go or just give them a slap on the wrist. This can be infuriating for officers that may have to rearrest the offenders. It can also be frustrating when first time offenders get a long sentence and a repeat offender gets off with nothing (James & Nelson 1975).

A common problem with new officers is that when they become a police officer they feel like they are superior and have power (Karaffa, Openshaw, Koch, Clark, Harr, & Stewart 2015). One problem with this is that the officers transfer this feeling of superiority onto their family. After coming home from work it can be hard for officers to switch from being controlling, aggressive, and emotionally closed off to having to be equal to their spouse, loving, and patience with their family (Karaffa, Openshaw, Koch, Clark, Harr, & Stewart 2015). It is hard for officers to switch from one person to another just because they are no longer on the clock. It is especially
difficult for male officers because men do not like to be seen as weak or helpless, so they can displace their feeling and turn them into rage anger (James & Nelson 1975).

**Alcoholism**

One of the principal reasons for officers being dismissed is because of excessive drinking (James & Nelson 1975). Drinking can be a major problem for police officers. It starts out as a way for them to find an escape from the reality that has become their life; they seek to forget all the horrible and violent things they have seen and the deaths they have dealt with and believe that they can find their escape at the bottom of a bottle. Usually after work officers tend to hang out with other officers or colleagues to relax and forget about their day at work and one of the places they chose to hang out is typically a bar, which can encourage drinking (James & Nelson 1975). Alcoholism can be such a dangerous thing for police officers for many reasons: they deal with the public, have weapons, and are often in confrontational situations. It is especially dangerous for officers to be alcoholic because if they are called in there is no way they would be able to perform, they would not be able to protect themselves, let alone the public (James & Nelson 1975). In the book *Police Wife* some police officers claim that “booze may have killed more policemen than bullets (James & Nelson 1975).

**Spouse**

The time management of the police officer can cause the spouse to be stressed. Spouses of police officer have to compete with the officer’s job just to get a little bit of their time (James & Nelson 1975). If the officer was always working late and missing important family or friend’s events it could cause problems between the couple. It would also cause problems if the spouse was at home making dinner waiting for their officer to show up and he/she had to work late. There could likewise be problems if the officer is constantly called in while at a family event,
child’s sporting event, or even on a date. This could cause the spouse and children to feel as if they are not as important as the police officer’s job or it could cause then to be sad or disappointed for always missing their events (Karaffa, Openshaw, Koch, Clark, Harr, & Stewart 2015). The spouse and family may get embarrassed if the officer left events early or did not show up at all. With the police officer at work all the time it can cause the spouse to feel like a single parent having to care for the children alone all the time (Karaffa, Openshaw, Koch, Clark, Harr, & Stewart 2015).

An officer going for or waiting for a promotion can strain the family because the officer may be putting in more time at work and spending less time with the family, which can make the family feel inadequate (James & Nelson 1975). The officer may also be stressed and taking it out on the family and this can affect the spouse and family. About forty-eight percent of officer spouses in a study on marital relationships report that officers sometimes take their stress out on their family and friends (Karaffa, Openshaw, Koch, Clark, Harr, & Stewart 2015). The spouse and family may have their feelings hurt or may even be scared of the officer if they take out their aggressive feelings on the family. It could cause break ups or even divorces.

Education can cause many problem due to less time together and loss of money. It could be a problem if the spouse wanted to have an education also, but had to wait for the officer to go first so they could get a promotion and they may not have the money for both of them to go at the same time. It is hard for the spouse to stick around and to be so understanding with a police officer’s job if the officer is never home and it seems like the job always comes before the spouse or family (Haines 2003). The main problems of conflict in officer marriages is said to be related to finical concerns and emotional intimacy (Karaffa, Openshaw, Koch, Clark, Harr, & Stewart 2015). Although spouses report being troubled about finances, they are more concerned
with their officers having to work extra jobs just to help with the family financial problems (Karaffa, Openshaw, Koch, Clark, Harr, & Stewart 2015).

If the spouse is married to or dating a new police officer then the police work could cause a lot of stress for the spouse. The spouse may not expect the changes the officer will go through and may not be ready for the after effects of the violence their officer will experience (Torres & Maggard 203). It could be like meeting a whole new person. The officer may shut out their spouse, or they may keep things from their spouse to protect them from the violence or just because they need to deal with it on their own (James & Nelson). The officer closing off their feelings or not talking about their day with their spouse can cause the spouse to feel as if they are excluded from the officer’s life and cause feelings of resentment in the spouse (Karaffa, Openshaw, Koch, Clark, Harr, & Stewart 2015). In the study by Karaffa, Openshaw, Koch, Clark, Harr, & Stewart 2015 spouses report that personality changes or emotional displacement were the worst aspects of being married to a police officer.

**Ways to Deal with Stress**

**Religion**

One of the most effective ways to help deal with stress is to have faith in their religion. Religion gives people something to believe in and to lift them up when they are down (James & Nelson 1975). Religion can be especially important for police officer because if they lose faith in humanity then their religion can remind them that there are still some good people in the world and that not everything is lost (James & Nelson 1975). If an officer gets involved with church activities it can help them have something to hold on to and it can give them some form of stability and it can also improve their relationship with the public (James & Nelson 1975). It is important for the family to form religious habitats such as reading a Bible, praying, or even just
teaching religion to their children; this can also act as a stabilizing agent in their chaotic lifestyle (James & Nelson 1975).

Religion can also help the spouses to deal with the stress of being married to a police officer. In a study over eighty-nine percent of the spouses reported that their religion gave them strength (Karaffa, Openshaw, Koch, Clark, Harr, & Stewart 2015).

**Communication**

Communication is a big factor in keeping a marriage alive and from breaking down. However police officer are not always able to communicate effectively because they have problems turning their emotion back on or have difficulty talking about work (James & Nelson 1975). It is important that the spouse is able to understand the officer and know how to effectively communicate with them without coming off as pushy or interrogative (James & Nelson 1975). If the marriage is to last it is important for the couple to find a way to be able to communicate and effectively convey their thoughts and feeling to each other without misunderstanding. It may be hard for the officer to find a way to communicate; therefore it may be up to the spouse to find a way to communicate with their officer and it is important to not give up on them at the first sign of trouble (James & Nelson 1975). It is also important for the spouse to talk to their officer or chaplain if they notice something wrong with the officer, such as excessive drinking or changes in behavior (James & Nelson 1975). It is necessary to seek help about their problems instead of just letting them fester or they will get worse and worse.

**Support**

The support of family and friends are important to a police officer. It can be hard work going at the job alone without having someone to talk too or to just relax with. It has been shown that many officers do not believe that their family or spouse supports them as much as their
family actually does (Karaffa, Openshaw, Koch, Clark, Harr, & Stewart 2015). The family and spouse need to find ways to convey their pride and support in the officer’s career.

Another form of support that is important is the support of the police department. It was reported that many officers do not believe that they receive enough support from the head of the department and do not feel appreciated (Karaffa, Openshaw, Koch, Clark, Harr, & Stewart 2015). It is necessary for the department to create a way to show their appreciation for their officers (Haines 2003).

**Conclusion**

It is important to understand what stress factors police officer and families are effected by. It is also important to know how to recognize the signs of stress in one another and how to get the right support and help that you need. The biggest stress factors that police officers face are dealing with the violent and painful side of humanity and having to close off their emotions for the job and not knowing how to turn them back on. The other stressors that effect the family are officers trying to get promotions, finances, extra education, time management, missing events or holidays, threat of rookie officers, keeping secrets from spouse and family and alcoholism.

From my research I concluded that one of the main problems in why police work has such a big effect on family life is because police officers and the family do not know how to properly cope with stress and the couples do not effectively communicate. The lack of communications and coping mechanisms cause the most strain on the family and officer, but could be helped with therapy or some form of counseling and religion. Religion is one of the biggest forms of support that a police officer and family can rely on to help them through their hard times.
The relevance of this paper is to help people understand the stress that police officer face and how it is able to affect their lives and family. However, the stressors mentioned in this paper can also be applied to other jobs that involve dealing with high stress situations, such as surgeons, firefighters, military, social workers, etc. A lot of jobs can involve the same type of stress or problems that police officers face and it can affect their home lives as well. This paper helps to highlight what the stressors may be, how they are able to affect the family, and how your spouse can feel as a result of the stress your career. It also presents some methods of how people can deal with their stress and how to be able to identify what is causing the stress in their lives.
References


