

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

The Relationship Between Stress and Gender for Probation/Parole Officers

Pitts, J. and Herman, D. (2011). The Relationship Between Occupational Stress and Gender for Probation/Parole Officers. *The Journal of Criminal Justice Research* 2:1, 1-32.

Key Words: occupational stress, health, gender, employment, coping

Summary/Conclusions

This Brief is based on a study of over 3,000 active probation and parole officers from 15 different states in the US. Researchers conducted a large scale, national survey. The instrument was designed to collect demographic data, employment information, and results from four separate stress surveys. The results indicated that male and female officers take on stress in different ways and manifest the symptoms differently, as well. Few studies have previously looked at this issue; however, some of the findings are similar to the results which appear in other sample populations.

Limitations of Information

The study did not use a randomly selected sample but used a snowball method (securing participants by word of mouth) instead. The results are a large sample; however, it may not be representative of all officers, as it was not random, it was not pulled from all states, and it did not include federal probation or parole officers. Also, even with equal amounts of men and women participating, the two groups were significantly different in several demographic and employment variables.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

How PO's Experience Stress

This study was designed with several hypotheses in mind: probation officer (PO) demographics would differ by gender, PO work experience would differ by gender, manifestations of stress would differ by gender, and levels of stress would differ by gender. The study explored internal stress (lack of supervisor support, not getting along with colleagues), external stress (lack of training or resources), job stress (large caseloads, excessive paperwork), and personal stress (family and personal issues).

The researchers designed a web-based survey to collect information and measure stress on officers actively working in probation and parole. For the purposes of the study, the researchers noted "stress occurs when the perceived pressure exceeds your perceived ability to cope." The survey included "six major sections: (1) officer demographics, (2) employment information, (3) caseload information, (4) manifestations of stress index, (5) occupational stress index, and (6) respondent stress solutions." The survey was disseminated in a variety of ways, using a snowball sampling method. After closing the survey and cleaning the data, the researchers had a final sample of 1,180 male officers and 1,183 females from 15 states.

Results indicated that female PO's were "more likely to be non-White, younger, better educated, unmarried, and have fewer dependents than their male counterparts." Although females were more likely to be in supervisor positions, they tended to have shorter lengths of employment in probation/parole. Females

in the sample were more apt to internalize stress (i.e., sleeping and eating disruptions), while males were more likely to "show more external manifestations (i.e., violent behavior, emotional outbursts, alcohol and/or drug abuse.)" Also men in the sample "experience more job stress than females," while there was no gender difference found with regard to personal stress.

In addition to these findings, the researchers also determined that "Taking vacations seems to reduce internal, external, and job stress but does not significantly affect personal stress."

Practical Applications

- ✓ Take time to identify and recognize the issues that create stress for you, then implement appropriate interventions to reduce the frequency and intensity of stress in the future.
- ✓ Allow yourself to ask for help. Utilize CSEAP resources, when stress is overwhelming or becomes symptomatic.
- ✓ Develop a habit of physical exercise to lessen the affects of stress and enhance the quality of nightly sleep.
- ✓ Create or enhance your support system at work and home.
- ✓ Clearly separate yourself from work on vacations and days off. In your absence, ask others to help with coverage, so you aren't compelled to check e-mails or phone messages while you are away.
- ✓ Be aware of stress as it manifests in your co-workers. Be willing to offer assistance or lend an ear, when colleagues seem "stressed out."