

COVID-19 Exposure: Surge in Stress, Anxiety and Depression (SAD) Among Police Officers

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63001/tbs.2024.v19.i03.pp23-27>

Received on:

20-07-2024

Accepted on:

06-11-2024

ABSTRACT

This study highlights the mental health challenges faced by police personnel in Rajasthan during the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing that psychological health is as critical as physical health for law enforcement. Police officers, typically trained for natural and manmade crises, were unprepared for pandemic-related duties. These added responsibilities led to heightened stress, anxiety, and depression as officers dealt with unfamiliar health risks and work stress. In this cross-sectional study, a sample of 681 officers actively serving in Rajasthan was surveyed during different waves of the pandemic, employing standardized psychometric assessment tools through an online questionnaire. The results revealed that a significant number of officers exhibited heightened risk perception, coupled with anxiety about potential infection and the transmission of the virus to others. These findings highlight the urgent need for comprehensive mental health support tailored to the unique circumstances of law enforcement personnel. Recognizing the importance of fostering resilience and enhancing mental health resources is essential for safeguarding the psychological well-being of police officers. By addressing these critical issues, law enforcement agencies can improve their personnel's mental health outcomes and enhance their capacity to perform effectively during crises and in everyday responsibilities. Prioritizing mental health initiatives within police departments is imperative for creating a healthier, more resilient workforce equipped to meet the challenges of their demanding roles.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic brought the world to a standstill, but even in such an unprecedented global crisis, some sectors had to keep functioning at total capacity. Police officers, as first responders, were on the frontlines, ensuring public safety, enforcing lockdowns, and handling emergencies while simultaneously grappling with the effects of the pandemic on their own lives. Unlike many other workers who could adapt to work-from-home environments, police officers were required to maintain a constant physical presence, exposing themselves to the virus. This exposure led to a range of stress, anxiety, and other psychological challenges, which were exacerbated by the unique pressures of the pandemic environment.

The Role of Police Officers During the Pandemic

Policing is a stressful occupation, illustrated by higher rates of mental health problems, misuse of alcohol, and suicide among officers than the general population (Hartley et al., 2011; Menard and Arter, 2013; Syed et al., 2020). Stress and associated adverse conditions can severely undermine police performance, increasing officers' burnout, clouding their decision-making, and impairing their ability to handle critical situations. (Verhage et al., 2018; Kelley et al., 2019).

Police personnel in India are generally trained in dealing with natural and human-made disasters, though pandemic control is not emphasized as a subject during police training. Consequently, the COVID-19 pandemic required many

police personnel to assume responsibility for emergencies not part of their regular work profile. Police officers traditionally play a vital role in maintaining law and order, but during the pandemic, their responsibilities increased dramatically (Wu et al., 2021). They were tasked with enforcing public health directives such as lockdowns, social distancing, and mask mandates, often encountering resistance from the public. In addition, they were expected to perform their usual duties of crime prevention and emergency response. As first responders, they were often the first to arrive at chaotic scenes, which included crowded hospitals, homes with potentially infected individuals, or quarantine centers.

For COVID-19 containment, limited movement of the entire population and enforcement of a series of regulations in the country, such as air travel cessation, closure of public transportation, cancellation of public events, workplace closure, and restriction of internal movement of the people, were warranted. Law enforcement was pivotal in this (Hung & Liu, 2022). The government used extremely restrictive measures to combat the pandemic, relying heavily on the police as the state's enforcement arm (Wu et al., 2021).

Every individual in the country faces the stress of this lockdown, and on the other hand, the police officers face the stress of handling the people who violate and protecting the people from exposure. This has led to an increase in the duty hours of the police personnel, apart from their regularly scheduled duties of maintaining law and order. These extraordinary duties of the

police personnel are almost equivalent to those of the healthcare workers who manage COVID-19-positive/suspected cases and are pretty stressful (Grover et al. 2020).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) identified them as a high-risk group due to their frequent interaction with the public and inability to maintain social distancing during specific duties. Given the unpredictable and dangerous nature of the COVID-19 virus, police officers were under constant threat of exposure. The intense fear of contracting the virus or unknowingly spreading it to their families and death further contributed to the psychological toll (Jennings and Perez, 2020; Stogner et al., 2020; Frenkel et al., 2021).

Adding to the inherent stress (occupational) of police personnel, the COVID-19 situation has impacted their mental health and well-being (Boovaragasamy et al., 2021; Kang et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2020).

Sources of Stress and Anxiety Among Police Officers Who Served COVID Duty

The challenges police officers faced during the pandemic were multifaceted and interlinked. The following sections explore the specific stressors and their impacts on officers' mental health.

1. Health Risks and Fear of Infection

One of the primary sources of stress for police officers during the pandemic was the fear of contracting COVID-19. Unlike other professions, police work often involves close physical interactions—whether dealing with arrests, crowd control, or community policing. These situations put officers at high risk of exposure. Despite efforts to provide personal protective equipment (PPE), shortages were common, especially in the early stages of the pandemic. The fear of getting sick and spreading the virus to family members created an ever-present anxiety for many officers (Sharma, Yaduvanshi, Sharma, & Saha, 2024).

For officers with pre-existing health conditions, the fear was even more pronounced. Older officers or those with respiratory issues, diabetes, or other comorbidities were acutely aware of their vulnerability to severe complications if they contracted the virus. Even officers without health issues expressed worry about the long-term effects of a COVID-19 infection, especially given the limited knowledge of the virus's lasting impacts during the pandemic's early days.

2. Increased Workload and Role Ambiguity

Another significant source of stress was the increased workload. Police forces worldwide were operating under strenuous conditions, with officers working overtime and being called to respond to situations outside their usual scope. This included enforcing public health directives, dealing with an increased number of domestic violence incidents (which surged during lockdowns), and responding to public protests and civil unrest related to lockdown measures.

Moreover, officers faced role ambiguity. Many police departments had little guidance on how to handle the enforcement of public health mandates, and individual officers were left to make judgment calls in situations that were not clearly within their domain. This uncertainty created great stress, as officers felt unequipped and unsupported while trying to balance public health enforcement with maintaining community trust.

3. Exposure to Trauma and Death

For police officers, exposure to traumatic events is part of the job, but the pandemic increased the frequency and intensity of such events. Officers were frequently called to assist in medical emergencies, including COVID-19-related deaths, often witnessing individuals dying alone due to quarantine restrictions. Seeing the suffering of others, especially when compounded with the uncertainty of the pandemic, contributed to what is known as secondary trauma. Officers who are repeatedly exposed to traumatic events without adequate psychological support are at higher risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Additionally, with overwhelmed hospitals and healthcare systems, many officers assisted in tasks typically performed

by medical professionals. This added responsibility, especially when it involved handling the deceased or those gravely ill from the virus, took a significant emotional toll.

4. Public Resistance and Hostility

Police officers during the pandemic faced not only the stress of their health and workload but also increasing hostility from segments of the public. The enforcement of lockdown measures, mask mandates, and social distancing rules led to confrontations with individuals or groups resisting these regulations. Protests against lockdowns in many countries resulted in violent clashes with law enforcement.

Officers were also at the center of protests concerning racial justice and police brutality that arose during the pandemic, particularly after the murder of George Floyd in the United States. Balancing the enforcement of public health mandates with the growing distrust in police added another layer of stress, further increasing the risk of mental health problems.

5. Isolation from Family and Social Support

Social distancing and quarantine measures created additional emotional burdens for police officers isolated from their support networks. Many officers chose to self-isolate to protect their families from potential exposure to the virus, often staying in separate accommodations for weeks or even months at a time. The absence of physical and emotional support from loved ones during this challenging period exacerbated feelings of loneliness, stress, and anxiety.

Additionally, the closure of many services that provide mental health support, such as in-person counseling, meant that officers had fewer avenues to seek help during the height of the pandemic. This combination of isolation and limited access to support systems contributed to deteriorating mental health.

This can result in a greater likelihood of police personnel developing a range of psychological problems such as burnout, emotional disturbances, psychological distress, sleep disturbances, anxiety, depression, substance use, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Tripathi, 2020).

The rationale and objective of the study

It is generally thought that police personnel are tough and mentally stable, but health emergencies such as pandemics can lead to detrimental and long-lasting psychological consequences due to disease-related fear and anxiety, social isolation, and the overabundance of misinformation on social media and elsewhere.

So far, only a few studies have focused on the mental/psychological consequences of perceived work stress in police officers and public safety workers during natural and human-made disasters and have reported high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression in them (Benedek et al. 2007; Gershon et al. 2009).

Experts across the world have stressed the fact that policing during the pandemic is “emotionally taxing” on police officers on duty. The Police Federation of England had alerted the health authorities that the police officers are operating in a “pressure cooker” like environment and are exposed to all sorts of trauma (physical and psychological) during this pandemic.

It is, therefore, imperative to understand the psychological toll police officers have to face during health crises. It is significant to know how police officers perceive health risks, work stress, and psychological distress during the pandemic. In this background, this project aimed to evaluate the police officers' perception of health risks, work stress, and psychological pain during the COVID-19 outbreak.

The research's findings can help us better understand police mental health issues during crises and shed light on the impact of COVID-19 on first responders' psychological health, which has significant implications for police-community relations and police performance.

Operational definition of variables under study:

- **Anxiety:** Anxiety is an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts, uneasiness, and physical changes like increased blood pressure.

- **Depression:** Depression is a mood disorder that causes a persistent feeling of sadness, hopelessness, low or worthless, and loss of interest.
- **Stress:** Stress is a feeling we get under pressure, overwhelmed, or unable to cope, which causes physical, emotional, or psychological strain.
- **Risk perception:** Risk perception refers to an individual's subjective judgment and evaluation of being infected with COVID-19 and its deadly consequences.

Methodology

This is a cross-sectional study conducted among police personnel of Rajasthan, India. The survey questionnaire was made available in Hindi. Permission was obtained from the police headquarters (PHQ) of the Rajasthan police.

Participants:

To be included in the study, the participants were required to be on duty at various police stations, check posts, and field duty in Rajasthan during different waves and peaks of Covid 19. A total of 689 officers participated in the study. After cleaning the data, 681 responses were found complete and suitable for analysis.

Measures:

Results

Table 1: Results regarding having infection of Coronavirus

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	343	50.7
No	334	49.3

Results revealed that almost half of the sample was infected by this deadly virus, whereas 49% of the sample managed to immune themselves from the infection.

Table 2: Results regarding covid infection to family members of participants

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	382	56.4
No	295	43.6

Results revealed that more than half of the sample (56.4%) had reported their family members having this infection.

Table 3: Results regarding losing any near/dear once's because of COVID

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	90	13.3
No	587	86.7

A small number of participants (13.3%) expressed that they lost a near/dear one because of COVID-19 infection.

Table 4: Results regarding family member's anxiety about getting the officer infected

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	500	73.8
No	177	26.2

Results revealed that almost ¾ of the participants (73.8%) reported their family members worried that the officer might be infected and fall sick because of the coronavirus. A small portion

Table 5: Results regarding family member's anxiety about spreading the infection to the family

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	467	69
No	210	31

Results revealed that a significant portion of the participants (69%) reported that their family members were apprehensive

Table 6: Results regarding the prevalence of anxiety, depression, stress, and risk perception among participants

It consisted of the following instruments:

- **Anxiety:** The GAD-7 developed by Spitzer, Kroenke, Williams, and Lowe (2006) was used. The Cronbach's alpha value for the present sample was 0.83.
- **Depression:** PHQ-9 developed by Spitzer, Williams, and Kroenke (1999) was used. It has nine items. The Cronbach's alpha value for the present sample was 0.87.
- **Stress:** Stress was assessed by a scale consisting of 11 items. Seven items were selected from DASS-21 developed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995), and four from the Perceived Stress Scale developed by Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein (1983). The Cronbach's alpha value for the present sample was 0.88.
- **Risk perception:** Risk perception of COVID-19 was assessed using a 12-item questionnaire developed by the researcher after reviewing the scale developed by Dai et al. (2020) and other studies in this area. The Cronbach's alpha value for the present sample was 0.88.

of the sample reported that their family members were not worried about that.

that the officer might bring the infection home. The family members may fall sick because of the coronavirus.

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Anxiety	7	34	10.31
Depression	9	45	12.39
Stress	11	55	15.58
Risk perception	12	60	26.74

Results presented in Table number 6 clearly explain the presence and reporting of anxiety, depression, and stress among participants. The mean scores indicate the moderately high presence of these disturbances. Results also reveal the presence

DISCUSSION

This study explored the police officers' perceptions of risk, mental health issues like depression, stress, and anxiety, and coping strategies during the COVID-19 outbreak in Rajasthan (India). This study revealed interesting findings based on a relatively moderate data set of specific frontline personnel and police officers during the COVID-19 outbreak in Rajasthan.

The study revealed that out of a total of 681 participants, 338 (49.6%) participants, almost half of the sample reported a moderately high amount of anxiety (scored nine or more). Two hundred fifty-five participants (37.5%) participants reported a moderately high amount of depression (scored 12 or more), whereas 299 participants (44%) reported a moderately high amount of stress.

To compare our findings on the mental health status of cops in this acute situation, articles were scarce. We compared our results with a few other studies on police personnel at some other time and the mental status of healthcare workers and the general population in the present crisis period. Few previous Indian studies focusing on the occupational stress factors in police personnel (Mumbai, Maharashtra, and Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh) doing routine duties had reported that about 18% of surveyed staff had a high degree of stress and about 73-88% were moderately stressed (Almale et al. 2014; Kamble and Phalke 2011).

The present study also revealed that the perceived stress in the police personnel on COVID-19 duty was moderately high, and the perceived stress was significantly associated with depressive and anxiety symptoms in the study sample. The nature of COVID-19 stress is slightly different from usual reported occupational stress as there is a component of perceived fear of getting infected as well as infecting own family members.

Results related to the perception of risk suggested that 603 participants (88.5%) reported a moderately high amount of fear (scored 16 or more) of getting infected, whereas 231 participants (34%) reported a high amount of risk perception (scored 30 or more). This fear is not only a factor that may be an unpleasant feeling for the officer but contributes significantly to the experience of anxiety, depression, and stress. An even more potent source of anxiety, depression, and stress is rooted in officers' fear of contracting COVID-19.

Perception of risk is critical in this context as it influences the mental health status and how the officer will cope with the situation (Sharma, Yaduvanshi, & Sharma, 2024). The majority of the participants reported that their family members are apprehensive because of their COVID-19 duty and have concerns about their and family member's health. This may contribute further to the participant's perception of risk.

Organizational and Systemic Challenges

While individual officers experienced stress, anxiety, and burnout, the organizational structures in which they worked often exacerbated these issues. Many police departments were under-resourced and ill-prepared for the magnitude of the pandemic's impact. Common complaints were a lack of mental health resources, insufficient PPE, and inadequate support for officers' well-being.

Police departments worldwide struggled to adapt to the new demands, with many implementing reactive rather than proactive strategies to address officer well-being. The lack of clear guidelines and the overwhelming workload left officers feeling unsupported and overburdened.

CONCLUSION

Police personnel have been instrumental in enforcing strict lockdown measures nationwide during the COVID-19 pandemic,

and reporting of risk perception among participants. The mean risk perception score is 27, indicating high-risk perception among participants.

critical in maintaining public order and safety. While the mental health challenges faced by healthcare workers have received significant attention and acknowledgment in both academic literature and public discourse (Agarwal & Sharma, 2011), the psychological issues affecting police officers—who are similarly engaged in high-stress environments—are often overlooked and underreported. This neglect is concerning, as police personnel are at a heightened risk for experiencing stress, anxiety, and depression directly related to their pandemic-related duties.

The unique challenges faced by police officers during this period have exacerbated the potential for psychological disturbances. The demands of their roles have increased significantly, requiring them to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances while facing threats to their health and safety. This added strain can lead to decreased productivity, impacting the officers' well-being and jeopardizing public safety. When police officers are mentally strained, their decision-making abilities, responsiveness, and overall effectiveness can be compromised, putting the community at risk.

Given the profound psychological toll that the pandemic has imposed on law enforcement personnel, it is crucial to address their mental health needs proactively. Implementing strategies that provide access to mental health services is essential. Initiatives such as peer support programs, resilience training, and stress management workshops can be invaluable in promoting mental well-being among officers. Furthermore, organizational support, including flexibility in work schedules and resources for coping with stress, can be pivotal in creating a supportive environment (Sharma, 2019).

By prioritizing the mental health of police personnel, law enforcement agencies can enhance the resilience and well-being of their workforce and ensure that these officers remain effective in their vital roles, ultimately benefiting the community they serve. Investing in mental health resources for police officers is not just an ethical obligation; it is a necessary step toward safeguarding public safety during times of crisis.

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