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Sources of Operational Stress Among Police Personnel Across Ranks: Implications for Work-Life Balance

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Abstract:
This study investigates the primary sources of operational stress experienced by police personnel across different hierarchical ranks and explores their implications for work-life balance. Using the 20-item Operational Police Stress Questionnaire (PSQ-OP), data were collected from ranks ranging from Constables to Assistant Police Commissioners. Results indicate that operational stressors such as insufficient time for family and social life, demands of overtime work, participation in work-related activities during days off, and lack of understanding from family and friends about job demands are predominant. The highest stress levels were reported consistently for the item concerning time constraints affecting personal relationships (PSQ-OP8), followed by stress related to court/community events (PSQ-OP5), overtime workload (PSQ-OP3), and social misunderstanding (PSQ-OP14). Stress perceptions varied by rank; junior and mid-level officers, notably Head Constables and Sub Inspectors, reported higher stress compared to senior ranks. The findings highlight significant variability in stress exposure and underscore the need for rank-specific interventions to mitigate occupational stress and promote healthier work-life balance among police personnel. This research provides critical insights for developing targeted mental health support and organizational policies.

Keywords: *Operational stress, Police personnel, Work-life balance, Rank differences, Psychometric Stress instruments*

1. Introduction

Police personnel operate within inherently stressful environments mandated by the complexity and unpredictability of their occupational duties. Operational stress, defined as the stress emanating directly from policing tasks and responsibilities, stands out as a significant challenge influencing officers' psychological resilience and physical health (Violanti et al., 2017). This stress derives from multifaceted sources including shift work, overtime demands, exposure to traumatic incidents, bureaucratic burdens, and the persistent challenge of balancing professional duties with personal life (Kurtz, 2017; McCarty & Skogan, 2020).

Effective policing necessitates rapid cognitive and physical responses often under adverse conditions, which cumulatively can deteriorate an officer's mental well-being and job satisfaction (Andersen et al., 2015). Existing scholarship firmly establishes that police experience higher stress levels compared to many occupational groups, increasing susceptibility to burnout, impaired performance, and detrimental effects on family and social domains (Patterson, 2020; Chopko et al., 2015). The imperative to assess and manage operational stress is thus dual: safeguarding individual health and sustaining organizational effectiveness and public trust (Violanti et al., 2021).

This study applies the 20-item Operational Police Stress Questionnaire (PSQ-OP) to comprehensively identify prevalent sources of operational stress across ranks ranging from Constables to Assistant Police Commissioners and beyond (McCreary & Thompson, 2006). Through quantitative analyses, the research elucidates how stress varies by rank and role, focusing on key stressors including work-life balance disruptions, overtime work pressures, and social support deficits. Such insights intend to inform targeted, rank-sensitive interventions that address the heterogeneous experiences of police personnel, contributing to enhanced occupational health practices.

2. Literature Review

Operational stress among police personnel has garnered extensive research attention due to its complex etiology and profound consequences. Stress in policing encompasses not only exposure to critical incidents but also organizational and operational demands intrinsic to law enforcement agencies (Violanti et al., 2017). Research underscores that while operational stress relates directly to job tasks such as shift work, overtime, and traumatic event exposure, organizational stressors including administrative burdens and workplace culture also significantly contribute (Kurtz, 2017; McCarty & Skogan, 2020). Various stressors uniquely characterize policing. Shift work, often characterized by irregular hours and night shifts, disrupts circadian rhythms and family routines, exacerbating psychological strain (Andersen et al., 2015). Overtime requirements and mandatory court/community appearances infringe upon personal time, intensifying work-life conflict and social isolation (Patterson, 2020). Indeed, the PSQ-OP identifies insufficient time for family and friends as the predominant stressor, reflecting consistent findings across populations (Kurtz, 2020; Christopher et al., 2018). This prolonged work-life imbalance can precipitate deteriorations in mental health and social functioning (Patterson & Violanti, 2010).

Exposure to critical incidents, such as violence and death, compounds stress, often contributing to post-traumatic stress symptoms and emotional exhaustion. Yet operational stress is not solely caused by rare critical events; routine operational duties like paperwork, equipment maintenance, and administrative tasks also tax officers significantly (Wang et al., 2019). Such multifactorial burdens highlight the necessity of comprehensive measurement instruments, such as the PSQ-OP, that encompass diverse stress domains (McCreary & Thompson, 2006). The literature reveals important variations in stress experiences by rank and role. Junior and mid-level officers often bear the brunt of frontline exposure to operational demands and supervisory responsibilities, contributing to elevated stress levels (Addison & James, 2022). These ranks report higher stress related to workload and social pressures compared to senior officers, who typically transition to strategic and administrative functions that afford greater control over schedules and reduced exposure to frontline stressors (McCarty & Skogan, 2020). Such rank-related disparities necessitate tailored interventions acknowledging occupational hierarchy and role-specific challenges (Stevens et al., 2023). Operational stress among police personnel extends its impact beyond individual health, affecting organizational dynamics and societal outcomes. High stress levels correlate with absenteeism, turnover intention, and diminished organizational commitment, undermining policing continuity and community safety (Morash et al., 2013). Furthermore, stress-driven erosion of work-life balance hampers family stability, increasing risks of marital discord and psychological disorders (Regehr et al., 2013). The intricate interplay between operational demands and social support underscores the critical role of familial understanding and social resources in buffering stress (Ramey et al., 2017). Reliable assessment of operational stress is foundational for effective intervention. The PSQ-OP stands as a psychometrically robust tool, demonstrating high reliability and validity across police populations (McCreary & Thompson, 2006; Wang et al., 2019). Its multidimensional structure captures the complexity of stressors, facilitating precise identification of high-impact areas warranting intervention.

Evidence supports multifaceted intervention strategies including flexible scheduling to ameliorate work-life imbalance, counseling and peer support programs to address psychological strain, and family outreach initiatives aimed at strengthening social understanding of policing demands (Duxbury et al., 2015; Christopher et al., 2018). These strategies foster organizational cultures prioritizing officer well-

being and resilience. Although abundant research delineates operational stress factors, gaps remain regarding longitudinal impacts and effectiveness of rank-specific interventions. Future studies employing longitudinal designs are needed to elucidate trajectories of stress and health outcomes. Similarly, exploring physiological markers alongside self-reported stress can enhance understanding of police stress mechanisms (Violanti et al., 2021).

3. Statement of the Problem

Police personnel face unique operational stressors stemming from the demands of shift work, overtime, exposure to traumatic events, and administrative responsibilities. These stressors challenge officers' psychological resilience and physical health and disrupt work-life balance. Junior and mid-level ranks report higher stress, reflecting frontline duties and supervisory roles, whereas senior ranks experience different stress profiles. Despite its critical impact on officers' well-being and organizational performance, operational stress remains insufficiently addressed through rank-sensitive interventions, necessitating systematic investigation and targeted occupational health policies.

4. Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to systematically identify and quantitatively analyze the major sources of operational stress experienced by police personnel across hierarchical ranks, ranging from Constables to Assistant Police Commissioners and above.

Specific objectives include:

1. To measure the prevalence and intensity of diverse operational stressors among police personnel using the validated 20-item Operational Police Stress Questionnaire (PSQ-OP).
2. To examine rank-based differences in the perception and experience of operational stress, focusing on how role-specific job demands influence stress levels.
3. To identify the key operational stressors that disproportionately affect work-life balance and social support among police personnel.
4. To explore the broader organizational and individual implications of operational stress, including its potential effects on absenteeism, turnover, and mental health outcomes.

5. Methods

5.1 Subjects

A total of 750 police personnel were recruited for this study to examine operational stress across ranks and its effects on work-life balance. Participants were drawn from various hierarchical levels within the police force, including Constables, Head Constables, Assistant Sub Inspectors, Sub Inspectors, Inspectors, and Assistant Police Commissioners and above. Of the initial 750 subjects, data from 629 individuals were deemed complete and suitable for analysis after applying rigorous inclusion and quality control criteria. The final analyzed sample thus represents approximately 84% of the recruited cohort. Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines. Demographic details including age, gender, rank, years of service, and work schedules were collected to characterize the sample and control for potential confounding variables in subsequent analyses. Ensuring a diverse and representative sample across ranks was essential for exploring rank-dependent differences in operational stress experiences. The final sample consisted of 629 police personnel, distributed across ranks as follows: 222 Constables, 256 Head Constables, 61 Assistant Sub Inspectors, 65 Sub Inspectors, 18 Inspectors, and 7 officers at the Assistant Commissioner of Police and above level. This broad representation captures a wide spectrum of operational roles and responsibilities, allowing for meaningful comparisons of stress experiences across hierarchical groups within the police force

5.2 Sample Size Calculation

The sample size for this study was determined prior to data collection using G*Power (version 3.1.9.7) for ensuring adequate statistical power to detect medium effect sizes. Power analysis was conducted for a multiple regression framework aimed at explaining variance in operational stress scores from rank and

demographic predictors. Using an alpha level of 0.05, a power level (1-β) of 0.80, and an estimated medium effect size (Cohen's $f^2 = 0.15$), the required minimum sample size was calculated to be approximately 92 subjects. This conservative estimate ensured sensitivity for detecting significant effects even with potential missing data or subgroup analyses. Given the hierarchical nature of rank-related analyses and the multifaceted nature of operational stress, a larger sample was targeted to enhance reliability, facilitate stratification by rank, and improve generalizability. The recruitment of 750 participants, with 629 valid responses analyzed, thus provided ample power for robust statistical investigation and subgroup comparisons. Operational stress was assessed using the well-validated 20-item Operational Police Stress Questionnaire (PSQ-OP), which measures diverse job-related stressors such as overtime, shift scheduling, court appearances, exposure to traumatic events, social support deficits, and physical demands. Each item is rated on a Likert-type scale capturing perceived stress severity, producing comprehensive profiles of operational stressors experienced. The PSQ-OP's psychometric robustness is demonstrated by Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding 0.94 and high corrected item-total correlations across items, indicating strong internal consistency and construct validity.

5.3 Data Preparation

Raw questionnaire data from all subjects were entered and systematically screened for completeness, accuracy, and consistency. Cases with more than 10% missing responses or exhibiting patterned or inconsistent answering were excluded from the analysis, explaining the final sample of 629 subjects. Missing data points in the retained dataset were handled using mean substitution for single missing values per participant to preserve sample size while minimizing bias. Descriptive statistics including means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis were computed for all PSQ-OP items to characterize the distribution and detect deviations from normality. While Shapiro-Wilk tests indicated some deviation from perfect normality, these were expected given the large sample size, and visual inspection showed only mild skewness and kurtosis ranges that are acceptable for parametric analyses. Psychometric properties of the PSQ-OP within this sample were assessed through reliability indices including Cronbach's alpha and corrected item-total correlations for each item. High values across these metrics reaffirmed the scale's suitability for this population.

5.4 Statistical Analysis

To comprehensively analyze operational stress across ranks, multiple complementary statistical approaches were employed. Descriptive analyses summarized the central tendencies and variability of stress scores across the full sample and within each rank category. Item-level mean scores identified the most prevalent sources of stress. One-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were used to test for significant differences in overall operational stress scores and individual PSQ-OP item scores across ranks. Post hoc comparisons with Bonferroni correction identified specific rank pairs contributing to significant effects. These analyses helped highlight rank-specific stress patterns and priorities for intervention. Reliability analyses of the PSQ-OP scale within subgroups confirmed consistency of measurement across ranks, ensuring valid comparisons. Effect sizes (partial eta squared) were reported for all significant omnibus findings to quantify practical significance. All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 26.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY). An alpha level of 0.05 was maintained for all significance testing.

6. Results

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of the PSQ-OP The 20-item Operational Police Stress Questionnaire (PSQ-OP) demonstrated excellent psychometric properties within the analyzed sample (n=629 police personnel), with Cronbach's alpha values consistently above 0.94 across all items, indicating outstanding internal consistency. Corrected item-total correlations ranged mostly above 0.60, suggesting strong item coherence with the overall stress construct measured by the scale. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for each PSQ-OP item. Mean stress scores across items ranged from 3.17 to 4.56 on a 1 to 7 Likert-type scale, reflecting moderate to high perceived operational stress. The highest mean stress score

was found for PSQ-OP8 ("How stressful is it when you don't have enough time to spend with friends and family due to work?"), with a mean of 4.56 (SD = 1.86). Other prominent stressors included PSQ-OP5 ("Stress from participating in work-related activities such as court and community events on days off") and PSQ-OP3 ("Stress related to overtime work demands"), both with means above 4.3, and PSQ-OP14 ("Stress when family/friends don't fully understand work demands") with a mean of 4.29. These findings highlight that work-life interference and social support deficits are the most intense sources of operational stress among police personnel, consistent with existing literature underscoring the challenges of balancing policing duties and personal life. The distribution of responses for each item showed mild skewness and platykurtic (flatter) kurtosis values, as detailed in Table 2. Skewness values mostly ranged between -0.24 to 0.50, while kurtosis values were generally negative, indicating broad response variability without extreme outliers. Shapiro-Wilk tests

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Indices for the 20-Item Operational Police Stress Questionnaire (PSQ-OP)

Items	Mean	SD	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha
PSQ-OP1	3.32	1.93	0.60	0.95
PSQ-OP2	4.02	2.01	0.69	0.95
PSQ-OP3	4.32	2.02	0.74	0.95
PSQ-OP4	3.89	2.15	0.58	0.95
PSQ-OP5	4.32	2.01	0.66	0.95
PSQ-OP6	4.08	2.11	0.58	0.95
PSQ-OP7	3.91	1.93	0.69	0.95
PSQ-OP8	4.56	1.86	0.73	0.95
PSQ-OP9	3.17	1.95	0.65	0.95
PSQ-OP10	3.85	2.05	0.72	0.95
PSQ-OP11	4.06	2.04	0.74	0.95
PSQ-OP12	4.10	1.81	0.75	0.95
PSQ-OP13	4.26	1.95	0.69	0.95
PSQ-OP14	4.29	1.95	0.66	0.95
PSQ-OP15	3.73	2.02	0.66	0.95
PSQ-OP16	3.49	1.96	0.70	0.95
PSQ-OP17	4.00	2.05	0.68	0.95
PSQ-OP18	3.86	1.96	0.70	0.95
PSQ-OP19	4.17	2.06	0.73	0.95
PSQ-OP20	3.69	2.11	0.58	0.95

indicated statistically significant deviations from normality for all items, but given the large sample size, these deviations are expected and do not preclude the use of robust parametric analyses for subsequent testing. Across ranks, the item PSQ-OP8 remained the highest reported stressor, with means ranging from 3.57 in ACP Above to 4.78 in Head Constables. This indicates a strong and consistent work-life balance challenge across all rank levels but with varying intensity. Other key items such as PSQ-OP5 (work activities on days off) and PSQ-OP3

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Skewness, Kurtosis, and Shapiro-Wilk Normality for the 20-item Operational Police Stress Questionnaire (PSQ-OP)

Items	Skewness	Kurtosis	95% Confidence Interval		Statistic	Shapiro-Wilk
			Lower	Upper		p-value
PSQ-OP1	0.33	-0.80	3.17	3.47	0.87	< 0.001
PSQ-OP2	0.02	-1.03	3.86	4.18	0.90	< 0.001
PSQ-OP3	-0.12	-1.06	4.16	4.48	0.89	< 0.001
PSQ-OP4	0.12	-1.23	3.72	4.06	0.88	< 0.001
PSQ-OP5	-0.12	-1.05	4.17	4.48	0.89	< 0.001
PSQ-OP6	0.02	-1.18	3.92	4.25	0.89	< 0.001
PSQ-OP7	0.06	-0.86	3.76	4.06	0.91	< 0.001
PSQ-OP8	-0.24	-0.80	4.42	4.71	0.90	< 0.001
PSQ-OP9	0.50	-0.81	3.01	3.32	0.88	< 0.001
PSQ-OP10	0.11	-1.08	3.69	4.01	0.90	< 0.001
PSQ-OP11	-0.04	-1.08	3.90	4.22	0.90	< 0.001
PSQ-OP12	-0.01	-0.71	3.96	4.24	0.92	< 0.001
PSQ-OP13	-0.09	-0.98	4.11	4.42	0.91	< 0.001
PSQ-OP14	-0.11	-0.95	4.14	4.44	0.91	< 0.001
PSQ-OP15	0.13	-1.03	3.58	3.89	0.90	< 0.001
PSQ-OP16	0.25	-0.97	3.34	3.65	0.90	< 0.001
PSQ-OP17	0.03	-1.10	3.84	4.16	0.90	< 0.001
PSQ-OP18	0.13	-0.97	3.70	4.01	0.91	< 0.001
PSQ-OP19	-0.06	-1.15	4.01	4.33	0.90	< 0.001
PSQ-OP20	0.16	-1.19	3.53	3.86	0.89	< 0.001

(overtime demands) also showed elevated stress scores across ranks but were notably higher among junior and mid-level ranks such as Head Constables and Sub Inspectors. Notably, senior ranks (Inspectors and ACP Above) generally reported lower operational stress scores across items, suggesting either reduced exposure to frontline stressors or greater autonomy in managing work demands. For example, PSQ-OP5 mean was 4.43 for ACP Above but only 1.48 for Inspectors, highlighting variability in stress domains linked to role differences. Standard deviations across all ranks and items indicated moderate to high interindividual variability, suggesting a heterogeneous experience of stress within each rank.

Table 3: Highest Sources of Stress Identified from the PSQ-OP Questionnaire

Items	Mean	SD
PSQ-OP8	4.5648	1.86294
PSQ-OP5	4.3248	2.01161
PSQ-OP3	4.3200	2.01755
PSQ-OP14	4.2880	1.94811

Across ranks, discrimination values were generally high, with PSQ-OP8 exhibiting the strongest discriminatory power especially among senior personnel (upper confidence intervals exceeding 5.0). This underscores its importance as a sensitive indicator of stress related to work-life interference. Some items such as those related to physical health demands (e.g., PSQ-OP11: maintaining physical condition under work demands) showed greater variability in discrimination across ranks, reflecting possible differences in perceived relevance or exposure. Table 3 summarizes the top four operational stressors with mean scores above 4.2: PSQ-OP8 (4.56), PSQ-OP5 (4.32), PSQ-OP3 (4.32), and PSQ-OP14 (4.29). These represent critical focal points where police personnel experience the greatest operational strain, primarily involving time scarcity for personal life, work obligations during off-days, excessive overtime, and lack of social understanding.

Table 4: Highest Sources/ Score of Stress with Rank

Items	Const		HC		ASI		SI		INS		ACP & Above	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
PSQ-OP8	4.44	1.92	4.78	1.86	4.31	1.70	4.69	1.78	4.22	1.80	3.57	2.07
PSQ-OP5	4.14	2.09	4.43	2.02	4.39	1.83	4.74	1.95	3.22	1.48	4.43	1.72
PSQ-OP3	4.16	2.02	4.52	2.03	3.82	1.85	4.78	2.00	3.72	1.93	3.57	2.15
PSQ-OP14	4.10	2.02	4.53	1.94	4.10	1.36	4.55	2.04	3.50	2.01	2.86	1.35
Here, Const, HC, ASI, SI, INS, ACP& Above stand for- Constable, Head Constable, Assistant Sub Inspector, Sub Inspector, Inspector, Assistant Police Commissioner & Above.												

Table 4 further details these top stressors by rank, revealing rank-dependent trends. Head Constables consistently reported the highest mean scores on key items, for example, 4.78 on PSQ-OP8 and 4.43 on PSQ-OP5, indicating that mid-line supervisory roles bear substantial stress burdens. Sub Inspectors also reported elevated stress levels close to these values, likely reflecting their frontline responsibilities coupled with supervisory duties. Conversely, senior ranks such as ACP Above reported the lowest mean stress scores on some items such as PSQ-OP2 (1.26) and PSQ-OP5 (4.43 but with wider variability), linking to the possibility of increased control over work schedules and responsibilities oriented more on administrative functions. This differential stress pattern by rank highlights the necessity of tailored stress mitigation strategies. Junior and mid-level officers' higher stress levels suggest interventions focusing on workload management, overtime regulation, and social/family support might be especially beneficial at these levels. In contrast, senior officers' lower operational stress might reflect reduced exposure to direct operational demands but potentially signal other unseen pressures not captured by this questionnaire, necessitating different support frameworks.

Overall, these results provide a comprehensive quantitative portrait of operational stress in police personnel, affirming that stress related to work-life interference, overtime, and social understanding deficits are paramount concerns. Variability across ranks underscores the importance of rank-specific organizational support and mental health policies to enhance resilience and work-life balance in police forces.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

The study's findings underscore the significant impact of operational stressors on police personnel across ranks, with pronounced implications for work-life balance and mental health. Consistent with prior research, the highest stressors involved inadequate time for family and social life, demands of overtime and off-duty work activities, and a lack of understanding from family and friends about policing demands. These dimensions of stress are critical, as they directly encroach on officers' personal lives, contributing to sustained psychological strain and potential burnout. The elevated stress in junior to mid-level ranks, notably Head Constables and Sub Inspectors, likely reflects their extensive frontline exposure combined with supervisory responsibilities. This group's heightened experience of workload and social pressure contrasts with the comparatively lower stress levels reported by senior officers such as Inspectors and Assistant Police Commissioners, who typically have greater autonomy and administrative roles. This rank-dependent gradient mirrors findings in related studies showing that operational stressors are mediated by role demands and control over work schedules. The heterogeneity within ranks, as indicated by variability in stress scores and item discrimination indices, highlights individual differences in coping and perception of stress. It suggests targeted mental health interventions should be nuanced, addressing specific operational stress domains most relevant to each rank and considering personal resilience factors.

The psychometric robustness of the PSQ-OP in this large, diverse sample confirms its utility as a diagnostic and monitoring tool for police occupational stress. High reliability and clear discrimination across stress domains enable precise identification of problem areas, facilitating tailored intervention development. Work-life interference emerged as a paramount issue, consistent with contemporary occupational health literature emphasizing the need for supportive organizational cultures that prioritize work-life balance for public safety personnel. These findings reinforce calls for structural measures such as regulated overtime, more predictable scheduling, and programs enhancing family understanding of policing demands. Given the chronic nature of operational stress and its links to adverse mental health outcomes like depression, anxiety, and burnout reported in police globally, the present results have broad practical significance. They provide empirical grounding for police leadership and policymakers to devise rank-specific strategies that mitigate occupational stress, bolster psychological safety, and enhance retention. Future research should longitudinally assess how operational stress trajectories relate to health outcomes and examine interventions such as stress management training, peer support, and physiological regulation techniques like heart rate variability biofeedback, which have shown efficacy in reducing police stress and improving decision-making under pressure. In conclusion, this study clarifies the multifaceted sources of operational stress among police personnel and delineates rank-specific stress profiles impacting work-life balance. Addressing these targeted stressors with evidence-based, rank-sensitive interventions is essential for fostering officer well-being, sustaining effective policing, and promoting organizational resilience.

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