

# Police Stress and Conflict During the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Conceptual Paper

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**Abstract:** *The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a blueprint for a better and more sustainable future. Goal 16 states that all people should have access to justice and that courts and the justice system should be an integral part of national accountability systems. The police, prosecutors, courts, jail system, and ministries that deal with justice and policing are all institutional targets. As a result, police officers perform a critical role in ensuring that citizens live safely by safeguarding their lives. Throughout the Goal 16 aims, there is a commitment to live in safety and prosperity. All elements of society were affected by the COVID-19 epidemic, which caused societal upheaval and altered conventions, but the first responders were particularly hard hit. Police officers were intended to arrange local shutdowns, encourage social distance, and enforce stay-at-home mandates. To minimize or break the chain of the COVID-19 epidemic, police officers must urge social separation and the usage of face masks. As a result, the focus of this conceptual paper will be on a discussion of the possible stress and conflict experienced by police officers and future research that other researchers can pursue.*

**Keywords:** Conflict, COVID-19, police officers, stress

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## 1. Introduction

Working in law enforcement is typically described as a demanding job, leading to conflict (Lambert, Qureshi & Frank, 2016). Police work involves much stress and a lot of unpleasant situations. This can impact police officers' psychological and physiological health, as well as their interpersonal connections and work-life balance (Viegas & Henriques, 2021). Furthermore, burnout police officers were favorably connected with occupational stress (Griffin & Sun, 2018). Police work is a demanding job, according to research, and this stress negatively influences officers' mental and physical health, performance, and interactions with civilians. Because of the high rates of depression, anxiety, burnout, and even suicide among police officers, mental health in the workplace have become a concern. Consequently, it is critical to frequently monitor stress and burnout levels to improve occupational health (Queirós, Passos, Bártolo, Marques, da Silva & Pereira, 2020).

When COVID-19 broke out worldwide, Malaysia issued a Movement Control Order (MCO) to stop it from spreading. The Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM), the Malaysian Armed Forces (ATM), and various other authorities are responsible for regulating citizen movement. Since March 2020, their primary mission has been to safeguard citizens' health and well-being by regulating MCO enforcement. A steady increase in the number of COVID-19 cases in Malaysia

has added to the police force's already heavy-duty – a hardship that only these officers could articulate in the name of ensuring Malaysians' safety. Although the Recovery MCO term will finish on December 31, 2020, the government has announced the Conditional MCO in Sabah, Putrajaya, Kuala Lumpur, and Selangor starting on October 14, 2020, the unexpected spike in COVID-19 cases reaching three digits. Social distance cannot be enforced to maintain peace and order in the country because the role demands police personnel to contact people at close range, even though they wear face masks. The spread of the Covid-19 illness is becoming more concerning, and many police personnel has been exposed to the risk of contracting the disease. Because police officers are on the front lines and closest to the public, their capacity to perform jobs is hampered by COVID-19 infection. These officers may endure various sorts of stress and conflict in carrying out their official duties due to their sacrifices during the MCO, and this will be the focus of this article.

## **2. Problem Statement**

COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by a novel coronavirus discovered until a December 2019 epidemic in Wuhan, China. COVID-19 posed new and heightened stressors to police officers. First, they were required to put in place new measures to ensure social separation, while stay-at-home orders were contested on political, economic, and legal grounds. Officers may have felt more concern and displeasure from the citizens they served as agents of new and unpopular restrictions (Shirzad, Abbasi Farajzadeh, Hosseini Zijoud, & Farnoosh, 2020). Second, they had to adapt their existing procedures to the "viral reality." To restrict exposure and guarantee enough police stayed healthy to maintain public safety, community and offender programs, service call responses, and patrol methods had to be adjusted. These modifications, which often focused on reducing interpersonal contact, might have resulted in cognitive dissonance if police officers eschewed servicing the public or made a minor arrest to limit their exposure. Third, the COVID-19 pandemic was a terrible event in of itself, posing a constant risk of bodily damage and forcing police officers to become more hypervigilant of their surroundings. Daily stress, safety precautions, and social isolation policies may have hampered their ability to use positive coping mechanisms viral (Stogner, Miller & McLean, 2020).

Long and often rotating shifts, threats of violence, increased need for hypervigilance, and a lack of public support make policing one of the most mentally exhausting professions, resulting in chronic stress (Hartley, Burchfiel, Fekedulegn, Andrew, & Violanti, 2011; McCraty & Atkinson, 2012; Paoline, 2003; Terrill, Paoline, & Manning, 2003). Police officers have a stressful and conflict-prone job (Biggam, Power, MacDonald, Carcary, & Moodie, 1997). As a result, even before coping with additional pandemic issues, stress, and uncertainty, law enforcement officers suffer from mental health problems at a higher rate than the general population (Hartley et al., 2011).

## **3. Literature Review**

### **Sustainable Development Goals**

In order to make the proposed 2030 SDGs a reality, the public sector must play an important role. Governments worldwide cannot function well without the enabling structures of public administration to deliver on their mandates, which are mostly set out in (political) manifestos, while also ensuring that the core mandate of meeting citizens' basic welfare needs is met through an efficient system. The functioning of such a system must enable entities or agents to behave in the best interests of delivering high-quality services, which would have already been determined by legal regulation – this should also make it easier for agents to operate in the

presence of information symmetry (Jackson and Jabbe, 2019). Leadership in the public service should guarantee that mandatory services are made accessible to the community to support the efficient functioning of the public service, particularly in the area of economic and social wellbeing (Jackson, 2020). As a result, the public sector must spend on solid security, such as policing, with the ultimate goal of reducing crime. Goal 16 states that all people should have access to justice and that courts and the justice system should be an integral part of national accountability systems. The police, prosecutors, courts, jail system, and ministries that deal with justice and policing are all institutional targets. As a result, police officers perform a critical role in ensuring that citizens live safely by safeguarding their lives. Throughout the Goal 16 aims, there is a commitment to live in safety and prosperity (United Nation, n.d). During COVID-19, the safety of emergency service providers such as medical professionals and police officers is generally prioritized. However, in the face of the COVID-19 epidemic, police officers face a variety of new obstacles, which may put them under further strain.

### **Definition of Stress**

Occupational stress is a type of psychological stress that is caused by one's work. Occupational stress is a long-term condition. Understanding the stressful conditions at work and taking actions to alleviate such factors can help manage occupational stress (Quick & Henderson, 2016). Workers may experience occupational stress if they do not feel supported by their bosses or co-workers if they feel they have little influence over the work they do, or if their efforts on the job are not commensurate with the job's rewards (WHO, 2020). Employees' emotional well-being, physical health, and job performance are all affected by workplace stress, a problem for both employees and employers (Sulsky & Smith, 2005).

### **Potential Sources of Stress**

Besides facing the COVID-19 Pandemics, there are other possible potential stress faced by the police officers.

#### **a) General working conditions**

Despite the relevance of individual differences, empirical research reveals that particular working conditions stress most people. Such research supports a greater focus on working circumstances as a significant source of workplace stress and job redesign as a primary preventative tool (NIOSH, 1999). Working conditions that cause occupational stress can also be found in the physical surroundings of one's workplace. Noise level, lighting, and temperature, for example, are all aspects of one's working environment. If these characteristics are insufficient for a thriving working environment, changes in mood and arousal can occur, making it more challenging to complete the job correctly (Rout & Rout, 2002). According to Barasa (2017), units of positive change in technological, human, and organizational environments substantially influence regular police officers' performance.

#### **b) Workload**

Dealing with busyness in the workplace can be stressful and serve as a stressor for employees. The workload is a crucial component of the demand-control model of stress since it is a work demand (Karasek, 1979). According to this concept, employment with high demands can be stressful, particularly if the employee has little control over the job. In other words, when demands or workloads are excessive, control acts as a buffer or protective component. The demand-control-support model was developed from this concept, which argues that a combination of high control and high social support at work buffers the impacts of high demands (Johnson & Hall, 1988). As a work demand, the workload is also pertinent to the job demands-resources model of stress, which states that occupations are stressful when demands

(such as workload) exceed an individual's ability to deal with them (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli, 2001). According to a study conducted by Stotland and Pendleton (1989), the sources of stress and strain among high workload police officers appear to be stress-producing events in their lives in general and stress-producing events while performing the job of patrol officer and dealing with crime and related matters.

### **c) Status and Salary**

Workplace status is linked to occupational stress because positions with lower socioeconomic status (SES) often give workers less autonomy and more instability than jobs with higher SES (Schonfeld & Chang, 2017). Reduced mental and physical health is linked to lower levels of job control and more job insecurity. In addition, the types of occupations that pay higher wages tend to give people more job-related liberty. As previously stated, job-related autonomy is linked to improved health. The ability to "unconfound" the association between stressful working conditions, such as low levels of autonomy and salary, is an issue in occupational stress research (Sinclair & Cheung, 2016). Researchers need to identify further how disparities in working conditions and pay affect health because higher levels of money buy resources (e.g., better insurance, higher quality food) that help improve or sustain health. The effectiveness of police officers' work performance was dependent on their salary (Chaiwuttisak, 2019). In other words, inequitable compensation may hurt their ability to perform well at work.

### **d) Bullying in the workplace**

The maltreatment of a person in the workplace by one or more co-workers or managers is known as workplace bullying. Bullying entails a power imbalance in which the bully or bullies have more power in the unit or organization than the target (Rayner & Cooper, 2006). Bullying can take many forms, including verbal, psychological, and even physical violence. Workplace bullying has negative consequences for employees, including despair and decreased productivity (McTernan, Dollard & LaMontagne, 2013). According to Dick (2009), police officers engage in a high amount of negative behaviour. Bullying, on the other hand, is primarily indirect and covert. Senior ranks are subjected to a broader range of behaviours, yet they are more likely to be bullied than lower ranks. The degree of bullying experienced was found to be a strong predictor of the managerial environment.

### **Definition of Conflict**

Conflict is rarely perceived as constructive; but, moderate amounts of conflict can be seen as mutually beneficial in specific situations (such as competition), fostering understanding, tolerance, learning, and effectiveness (Jowett, 2007). According to Afzalur (2010), all definitions of conflict include knowing conflicting interests and the process of attempting to stop the opposing perspective or views. Afzalur's proposed definition of conflict is "an interaction process exhibited in incompatibility, disagreement, or discord inside or between social units," based on this. Afzalur further points out that a dispute might contain a single person who is conflicted inside himself (the intrapersonal conflict). Afzalur mentions several conflict behaviours, beginning with disagreement and progressing to verbal abuse and interference.

### **Causes of Conflict**

There are numerous causes of conflict, as evidenced by numerous works of literature. According to Isa (2015), the following factors might contribute to conflict in an organization:

### **a) Ineffective communication**

A breakdown in communication is one of the most common causes of workplace conflict. It could lead to a change in communication style or a complete breakdown of communication. Employee A, for example, has reassigned a superior position to employee B, but none of them has been informed of the reassignment. It can lead to employee unhappiness and a difficult relationship between top management and co-workers. Due to a lack of good corporate communication, employees will make incorrect assumptions, and organisational gossip will flourish. Interpersonal disagreement not only produces friction, but it also lowers staff morale and productivity. According to Schafer (2010), one-quarter of police officers claimed ineffective leaders lacked communication skills, such as an inability to understand the human needs and motives of those they attempted to influence.

### **b) Personality Differences**

Another form of workplace conflict is a personality clash among employees. Employees come from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences, all of which have an impact on their personalities. Employees that fail to notice or acknowledge the distinctions in each other's personalities cause organisational problems. An employee with a strong personality and a powerful voice, for example, can bring up specific difficulties. A co-worker with this personality type may be insulted by a co-worker with a different personality type. Others are unable to accept such a disrespectful and straightforward manner, and it is one of the leading sources of workplace conflict. Police officers are exposed to a number of potentially stressful situations and incidents as part of their duties. These can cause a great deal of personal distress, as well as changes in mood and psychological functioning in the short term. According to some scholars, police officers develop traits like cynicism, aloofness, suspiciousness, and alienation during their careers to assist them cope with the rigours of their jobs (Evans, Coman & Stanley, 1992).

### **d) Anxiety**

Stress manifests itself in a variety of ways, including sleep disturbances, perspiration, and a loss of appetite, all of which have an impact on job performance. As a result, there may be departmental or organisational conflicts. Husain (2020) predicted that police officers in metropolitan locations will experience higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress than officers in rural areas in a study. The major differences assumptions support the conclusions.

### **e) Harassment of a sexual nature**

Unwanted behaviour that arises as a result of a person's gender is known as sexual harassment. Sexual assault can take many forms, including unwanted sexual solicitations, sexual preference requests, and sexual or physical engagement. Depending on whether the conduct is unwanted and how violent or pervasive it is, sexual assault can take many different forms. In the absence of a proper norm of conduct for sexual harassment in the workplace, conflict may occur. According to de Haas, Timmerman, and Höing (2010), sexual harassment is brutal to prevent workplace hazards in male-dominated businesses, and implementing a comprehensive policy is insufficient to prevent this workplace hazard among police officers.

Although Isa (2015) focuses on possible conflict in the workplace, the same principles can be applied to police officers.

#### 4. Conclusion

Work stress among police officers is expected during the MCO since this unprecedented pandemic necessitates urgent action by these crucial frontliners to protect the people and the nation's well-being. As a result, any disagreement must be handled with caution. However, further research needs to be done with a large number of police officers involved. To support the study's goal, data could be collected quantitatively, qualitatively, or both. Analysis of the integration of different agencies during the MCO and its obstacles is also essential and might be duplicated during any future crises.

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