

MANAGING THE DANGEROUS NATURE OF POLICE ACTIVITY: VULNERABILITIES, THREATS AND ASSOCIATED WORK RISK FACTORS

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of new threats and major changes in the security systems of the countries all over the world affects police work, which, combined with the complex operational situation and lack of staff, creates new and increasing risks which brings interesting challenges for managers to prevent and mitigate threats to the security and health of policemen who act to protect human lives and property. All these changes also increase the level of stress and can lead to even irreparable damage to the physical and mental health of police officers making their activity very difficult from the perspective of the efficiency of the missions carried out.

Policemen live constantly under the threat of physical hazards, have an irregular and prolonged work schedule, and by their job nature they come into contact with harmful factors and very unpleasant aspects of life. Specific to police activities is that these risks can not be controlled to the same extent as in other areas of activity, which makes this profession very difficult.

Difficulties derive also from the fact that even the legal act that governs the safety and health at work in Romania excludes law enforcement activities, relatively referring to particular cases in which police, army and emergency activities are in contradiction with the same laws that govern such activities. Taking into consideration the fact that in the specialty literature the issue of security and health in the field of policing is very little addressed or not at all, the paper aims at reviewing the cases of violence to which the policemen are exposed during their work, corroborated with statistical data provided by human resources offices within the Romanian Ministry of Internal Affairs.

KEYWORDS: *risk management, occupational risk, perceived risk, emerging risks, organizational stress, police liability.*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: *D23, D91, F52, G32, J28, K32, K42, M54.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Police work involves more responsibilities and risks than any other common activity. Policemen around the world carry out dangerous missions (training with firearms, self defence weapons, direct involvement in fighting violent crime, organized crime, terrorism), endangering their lives and physical integrity. According to the literature, the main work and social environment factors in which policemen operate but at the same time negatively affect their health and safety are: prolonged physical and psychological efforts in the process of carrying out a multitude of specific activities; working arrangements which can not allow a healthy lifestyle and derives from prolonged working hours sometimes extended for longer periods, shift work, including nocturnal work, inadequate nutrition, lack of rest periods for restoring the work capacity; the pressure of the deadlines for fulfilling the tasks and specific responsibilities when ascending the hierarchical level; stress and tension caused when acting in force, moral issues determined by the possibility of using firearms, special techniques and procedures with their possible negative consequences; fear

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determined by the existence of the possibility of occurrence of aggression from the offenders directed to the policeman or to the members of his family.

Risk factors that influence the health and security of police officers are determined both by the danger created by the complexity and the emergence of new offences (high crime offences against citizens, cybercrime, terrorism), the upgrading of the offenders with new technology and new ways of committing offences, the extension of cross-border crime phenomenon related to illegal migration, organized crime, increasing of economic and financial crime, robbery, public and private theft, the increasing of natural and environmental risks (massive snow, catastrophic floods, earthquakes, technological accidents) and determined by the personality, psychological capabilities, knowledge and skills of the police officer.

Lack of special legal and practical training, insufficient knowledge of overall and specific police activity, inability to intervene, indifference to continuing professional training, lack of modern concepts when dealing with personnel selection are reflected negatively on the quality and effectiveness of the activity of police officers and can be prefigured into circumstances that could make the emergence of potentially dangerous situations both for the life and health of citizens and for the security and health of police officers when ensuring public order, which leads to their exposure to dangerous and unjustified risks.

A short review of the literature on occupational health and safety issues of police officers indicates that police face such problems as assault, homicide, lung diseases caused by air pollution (outdoor workers such as traffic police workers), communicable serious diseases (hepatitis, HIV), cardiovascular problems, arthritis, and ulcers (Bullock, 2007; Bohle, 2000), physical and mental exhaustion, fatigue (Ruiz & Morrow, 2005), musculoskeletal disorders, physical harassment, discrimination and even suicide due to stress (Violanti, 1996).

Although there has been some research completed in Australia, Canada and the United States on occupational risk for police officers, thorough searches on the internet have revealed minimal research on the topic in most European countries.

Inquiries revealed that policemen have a high-risk job compared to other occupations (Driscoll et al., 1999), they are facing a continual sense of danger from an unknown enemy and alternate between the violence of the street and the normalcy of civilian life on a daily basis (Violanti, 1999a).

The American literature indicates that policing is among high-risk occupations for homicide (Brown et al., 2001; Castillo et al., 1994; Kraus, 1987). Homicide risk is more common for US officers doing undercover work, making arrests, conducting drug raids, attending domestic disputes or pursuing speeding motorists (Clarke & Zak, 1999; Flannery, 1996; Knight, 1999). US police officers are more frequently killed intentionally than accidentally (Boylan & Little, 1990) and a few of them have been killed off-duty, most commonly after intervening in robberies, or when on-duty police mistook them for gang members (Davis & Pinizzotto, 1996). Some officers died due to unintentional firearm discharges, when they ignored firearms safety rules while unloading and disassembling weapons (Button, 1999).

Risk of homicide began to fall continuously in the United States, due to the widespread use of bullet proof vests and body armor protecting vital areas of the human body, better training, communications and police practices (Brown et al., 2001).

Although firearms are rarely used, police officers are most at risk of being assaulted when attending unpredictable domestic disputes, physical force being the most common cause of injury, followed by contact with body fluids, impact with solid bodies, blunt instruments or pointed objects, ax and knives hitting.

While investigating crimes, taking samples or arresting suspects, police officers are exposed to dangerous bacteria or fluids. During the body search of a suspected drug user or his residence, there is always the risk of a puncture wound from needles which may be contaminated with HIV, hepatitis or from the saliva of a restrained infected suspect who bites (Bigbee, 1987).

Police suffer stress through constant exposure to danger, traumatic events, prisoner threats, conflicting task demands, shortstaffed stations, court appearances, departmental inquiries and work in isolated rural areas (Stack & Kelley, 1994; Mitchell, 1999; Mahon, 1990; Paton & Smith, 1999; Swanton & Walker, 1989; Turner, 1987; Violanti, 1996).

Chronic fatigue often follows shiftwork with extended hours (Figley, 1999; Turner, 1987; Vila & Taiji, 1999). Like many essential service workers, police can be rostered at almost any time over a 24-hour, seven-day roster. The ill effects of shiftwork have been well documented, including gastrointestinal upsets, psychosomatic disorders, weight gain and serious long-term disorders such as coronary heart disease (Bohle, 2000; Patterson, 1997; Stack & Kelley, 1994; Violanti, 1996).

Indicators include absenteeism, irritability, concentration difficulties, insomnia, general fatigue, workers' compensation claims, alcohol abuse and a range of psychosomatic symptoms.

Police suffer a range of other work-related injuries like breaking ligaments or bones from jumping over fences during chases and illnesses, such as hypertension (Swanton & Walker 1989).

The Canadian studies on the matter focuses on the risk of assault for police officers compared to other occupations. The studies indicate that police officers are at greatest risk of time loss due to violence (Boyd, 1995). There is also a difference in rates of risk within the occupation such as an officer is far more likely to be assaulted when responding to a robbery, and when arresting and transporting suspects to jail than when responding to other problems such as domestic quarrels (Ellis et al., 1993).

Other situations where officers are at an increased risk of assault are when investigating suspicious situations, robbery and domestic disturbance (Ellis et al., 1993).

In Europe the information on the topic of assault on police officers is scarce, but there has been an abundance of research completed on air pollution affecting European police forces (Atimtay et al., 2000; Burgaz et al., 2002; Carere et al., 2002; Fustinoni et al., 1995), ergonomic risks, as variables describing exposure to occupational physical stressors (Bigras, 1991; Burton et al., 1996; Gyi & Porter., 1998) and stress related activities (Collins & Gibbs, 2003; Deschamps et al., 2003; Green, 2004; Kop et al., 1999).

2. OCCUPATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS IN ROMANIAN LAW ENFORCEMENT

The various categories of staff working in the Romanian Ministry of Internal Affairs are daily engaged in the most diverse and medium to high-risk public order missions. Although the analysis of specific indicators and surveys show that the safety of the citizen has increased, the dynamics of the criminal phenomenon remains a constant threat not just for the citizen but also for police personnel.

It is already a common fact that the intervention of policemen, gendarmes and national emergency personnel often result with threats, violence, harassment, death-related injuries or even the murder of the law enforcement staff involved. It can be noted that more often there are situations when citizens refuse to comply with the legal requests from the law enforcement, imposing their own conditions of enforcement or compliance with the law. Also, the assessments indicate the persistence of exogenous and endogenous psychosocial and work related risk factors that interferes with police work such as: the proliferation of violence and aggressive behavioral patterns, on the background of excessive use of alcohol by offenders, poverty and social exclusion, the organizing of the offenders in groups in order to act more forcefully and brutally against police officers, the intention to act by oneself, without being accompanied by other colleagues when they intervene in various cases reported by citizens, the deterr of police forces from using the legal means for fear of possible legal repercussions, the difficulties in ensuring adequate professional training focused on practice and the lack of human resources and logistical facilities necessary for both the physical protection of the policemen and the safe preservation of public order, lack of staff, especially in rural areas and permissive legislation.

Since there is still a strong personal perception among staff that there is a lack of adequate legal instruments for personal protection during missions, a unitary approach to the issue from a organizational, managerial, logistical, financial and legislative perspective is needed.

The area of health and safety management in policing is very little addressed in the Romanian literature and indicators related to work accidents and aggression against policemen have not been so publicly revealed until 2016. Though statistical data on work-related accidents and risks factors associated with police work are gathered in databases, often inaccessible to the public, we can figure out from the analysis of the indicators comparing with international research in the field, that the risks faced by the Romanian police are similar to those faced by foreign policemen, with small differences depending on the characteristics of each country. In the following chapter we will focus only on the cases of violence committed against different categories of romanian forces taking into account the approach of the problem from a management perspective.

3. COMPARATIVE BRIEF ANALYSIS OF VIOLENCE CASES AGAINST POLICE PERSONNEL DURING THE FIRST SIX MONTHS OF THE CURRENT YEAR

The lack of human resources necessary to carry out tasks safely and successfully, increases the vulnerability of the police personnel during their current missions. Data analysis reveals that in the first six months of this year there were almost 19.9 thousand job vacancies, the equivalent of a staff shortage of nearly 14 percent.

The staff deficit increased with the entry into force of the State Military Pensions Act, so that out of the total losses of more than 12.6 thousand employees registered by the end of the last year, almost 90 percent of staff retired. In addition, the insufficient coverage of human resources acting in the street was also amplified by the secondment to other law enforcement institutions of almost 3.2 thousand employees.

Taking into consideration the fact that the romanian police forces responsible for ensuring the public order register a deficit of almost 18 percent in relatively equal percentages in urban and rural areas, it is very difficult not to say that from the risk factors listed above the lack of human resources contributes as a sufficient element of vulnerability for the safe execution of specific activities in public places. It is still to be seen whether this breach in the national security staff structure takes the blame for the high level of violence felt by police officers at work.

Statistical data reveals that in the first six months of this year, the number of cases of violence against personnel acting in the street and external environment (policemen, gendarmes, emergency personnel, border policemen) increased with 22 percent more cases registered than last year, most of them committed in urban areas (66 percent). Thus, most of the acts of violence were directed at staff conducting patrol activities (44 percent) and monitoring of road traffic (13.5 percent). By comparison, although at the end of last year street crime decreased with almost 9 percent, being the lowest crime rate in the last eleven years, the number of cases of violence against the personnel was still high, so 26 percent was engaged in patrol activities and 65 percent of the acts of violence were reported in urban areas.

The Romanian National Police statistics show that most violent actions (77 percent) were committed against police officers - compared to over 87 percent in the same period last year, taking into account the following trends: in the first month there was a growth of 61 percent, in the second month of 5.4 percent, in the 3rd and 4th month the violent actions decreased by 23 percent and 4 percent, and in the 5th and 6th month they increased again by 11.5 percent and 7.3 percent.

In over 45 percent of the cases, attackers were under the influence of alcoholic beverages, 47 percent used physical force and 38.5 percent verbal threatened police officers.

From the Romanian Gendarmerie perspective, the number of violent acts committed against gendarmes had doubled during the analyzed period, so that in 63 percent of the cases the violence took place during patrol activities and almost 27 percent while restoring public order, almost all of them occurred in the urban area (over 83 percent).

Regarding Border Police, the violence against personnel is relatively low, due to the increased staffing capacity of the state border in order to make the fight against cigarette smuggling more effective.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Even if there are many socio-cultural differences between the reviewed countries, much of the research about police work related risks analyzed in this paper indicates important similarities between the different national police institutions in the world, providing a starting point for further research although there is still so much to be done.

A first intervention to limit cases where policemen are assaulted, the most pressing issue of occupational risk in policing, must be taken by police managers. First, they have to take measures for increasing physical training in the field of self-defense, reassess all specific internal procedures concerning: the use of legal means, the use of firearms and intervention equipment, body control and immobilization of persons. Also they have to reassess the thematic training of personnel on how to intervene in specific conflicts and to adapt professional training programs by introducing emotional and crisis communication management themes.

Even though training must be a systemic part of the organization, is not a stand-alone solution. Police managers must also act on work environment, organizational culture, personnel management and supervision whenever they find that changes in the law have occurred, new equipment or technology is needed, when employees demonstrate a lack of competency or when mandated by State regulation.

The first recommendation is that police in-service training should include regular sessions on survival techniques, patrol, firearms and self-defense procedures, taking into consideration even defensive driving.

Another category of recommendations involves increasing staffing levels which can decrease the risk of assault on police officers. By increasing the number of police officers that respond to high-risk cases, police officers would be better prepared to handle critical situations. This would create the possibility for police personnel not to act alone in the street, also generating a drop in acts of violence directed at police officers.

Other suggestion for prevention of assault on police officers is to alter officer training to include human awareness training and effective communication skills. Also there is a need in changing the design in the police uniform, including the way in which the body armor is disposed. Another solution for the assault of police officers is for senior officers to communicate more effectively what young officers should be trying to achieve on the streets. A lack of direction from the senior police officers can cause confusion and uncertainty in the minds of young officers as how they should approach and deal with a matter.

Furthermore, there is a need for managers to identify risks related with police work, assess and categorize these kind of risks by severity, frequency, consequences, develop controls to eliminate or mitigate them, implement the controls and evaluate the efficacy of the controls. This can be easily done by designing IT applications with predictive function, information and publicity, so that each manager can see those positions involving great risks at work.

They also must reevaluate occupational standards in order to be consistent with the selection process (so that candidates acknowledge the risk that police activity involves), by carrying out analysis for reviewing the existing positions in relation to on-the-job risks, social and economic needs of the police officer, and to achieve, after reviewing these positions, a standardization of similar positions through unique job descriptions or similar occupational standards. Recruiting candidates for entering the system must be carried out as a proper recruitment activity aimed at identifying potential candidates who can accept risks involving police work.

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