

The Study on Work Stress of Prison Guards from Prisons in City A, China

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Abstract: As the national penalty executive department, prisons play a pivotal role in punishing and reforming criminals. The prison guards, which are the central part and core strength in prisons, shoulder the sacred mission of educating and reforming the prisoners, ensuring prison safety and maintaining social stability. It is the particular working objects, working environment, and working task that highlight the work-related stress of the prison guards. In this study, the workplace stressors are divided into four aspects—social, organizational, working and individual levels; the stress reaction can be split into physiological reaction, psychic reaction and behavior reaction. This paper has surveyed 105 prison guards from five prisons in City A and conducted descriptive statistical analysis and demographic variable divergence analysis with the help of statistical software SPSS18.0. Based on the aforesaid effort, the paper has ascertained the major stressors and the stress symptoms of these prison guards and found that the difference of individual attribute exerts noticeable impact on their work stress level.

1. Introduction

As social competition gets fiercer, the work-related pressure is increasing in this connection. Organizations usually divide the pressure into various working tasks and activities, spreading it to all levels of members and thus bring stress to them. Unresolved work stress contributes to burnout, compassion fatigue, disengagement, and other work-contextualized factors. (Klein C J, Dalstrom M, Lizer S, et al.2019 [1]) The problem of workplace stress is related not only to the quality of members' personal work and lives, but also the overall vitality and efficiency of the organization.

The law enforcement profession has been widely considered to entail great stress at work. Since the 1970s, researchers have focused on the topic of stress caused by police work (Tsai, Nolasco, & Vaughn, 2018[2]). Studies have indicated that the police profession is the most stressful occupations often viewed as an occupational hazard of law enforcement (Bishopp, Worrall, & Piquero, 2016[3]; Kuo, 2015[4]; McCreary, Fong, & Groll, 2017[5]; Ramey, Perkhounkova, Hein, Bohr, & Anderson, 2017[6]). There is empirical evidence that occupational and organizational stressors embedded in the police organization could lead to long-term adverse consequences for police officers (Lambert, Qureshi, Frank, Keena, & Hogan, 2017[7]; Naz, Gavin, Khan, & Raza, 2014 [8]; Padyab et al., 2016[9]. When it comes to coping strategies for stress, individuals tend to differ in their reactions and coping styles (Clifton, Torres, & Hawdon, 2018[10]).

The research objects of this paper are the prison guards of City A. Prison guards henceforth refer to those who work in the frontline and manage prisoners directly instead of those involved in administration without contacting prisoners. At present, studies on workplace stress mainly focus on teachers, medical staff and enterprise personnel. Low social awareness of prison management leads to inadequate studies on prison guards' stress at work. This new era has been seeing increasingly various crimes, diversified criminal backgrounds and complex reforming of criminals (Xu Xiaofeng, Zhang Enyou.2010 [11]). Prison guards are working under high pressure in the relatively closed environment of the jail, with the militarization of management, the state of high alert and the particularity of working objects. The support and care, nonetheless, received by these guards at present are far from matching their own need, which severely undermines their personal developments and team construction.

The term "work stress" appeared in academic literature in the early 1970s. Scholars mainly study work stress from three perspectives: stimulation, reaction and interaction. The first category is based on external stimulation which will cause abnormal reactions and it emphasizes the analysis of stress sources. (Caplan, Cobb&French& Van Harrison, & Pinneau,1975[12], Lazarus&Launier,1978 [13]) The second category is people's response to inadaptation of the outside world. (Summers & De Cotiis & De Nisi, 1995) [14], Luthans ,2003 [15]) The last is the interaction between personal response and external stimulation. (Beehr ,1978[16], Schaufeli & Peeters, 2000 [17]). We tends to define work stress from the perspective of interaction, because stress is a dynamic process. In this paper, work stress is the individual's psychological, physiological, and behavioral responses to work stressors after the interaction with their subjective cognitive patterns.

Previous studies start mainly from psychological perspective, yet there are few studies that look at the current situation of prison police work and improvement approaches from the angle of human resource management in public sectors. Through empirical research, this paper analyzes the workplace stress of the prison guards in different types of prisons in City A, and explores the influence of different types of prisons on the work stress of the prison guards in order to improve their working efficiency via effective stress management.

2. Research Design

2.1. Research Object

The research objects of this paper are the prison guards of City A, which is an underdeveloped region in China. With relatively backward production and living conditions, the total economic volume of City A ranks among the bottom vis-a-vis most other cities in China.

2.2. Sample Selection

Case interviews and questionnaires are administered to collect relevant data for further analysis to understand the current situation of the targeted prison police.

(1) Sampling Method

The five prisons in City A have a total of about 880 prison guards. In the selection of the sampling method, this research adopts the random sampling after a primary classification. The prison guards are first divided into three levels according to their positions district supervisors, sub-district supervisors and the general prison guards. Then, the random sampling is carried out in each level of prison guards.

(2) Questionnaire Investigation

This empirical study mainly adopts the method of questionnaires to collect data. The first section of the questionnaire deals with the background information of these guards. The second section examines stressors of prison guards, with a total of 42 measurement items. The third section is concerned with the stress symptoms underpinned by 15 measurement items.

1) General information questionnaire. According to the actual needs of the survey, the following six items are set up: the prison type, age group, marital status, education background, job position and working years of the respondents.

2) Questionnaire on the stressors of prison guards [18]. The questionnaire of prison guards stressors adopted in this paper is compiled by Professor Luo Dahua from China University of Political Science and Law.

3) Stress symptoms questionnaire [19]. The questionnaire of stress symptoms is the one used in the paper "Research on the influencing factors of prison guards work stress and their interrelations". The questionnaire comprises 15 items, including three dimensions of individual physiological symptoms, psychological symptoms and behavioral symptoms, each of which includes five issues.

2.3. Questionnaire Distribution and Data Collection

This questionnaire is anonymous. In 5 prisons of City A, 150 questionnaires were sent out, 127 of which were recovered, with a recovery rate of 84.7%. The valid questionnaires were 105, and the

effective rate was 82.7%.

3. Empirical Analysis

3.1. Demographic Information

Through the analysis of the recovered questionnaires, the demographic information is shown in table 1.

Table.1. Demographic Information (N=105)

Variable Name	Group	Frequency	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Prison Types	High Alert	31	29.5	29.5
	Medium Alert	74	70.5	100
Age Distribution	< 25	17	16.2	16.2
	25 - 30	26	24.8	41
	30 - 40	28	26.6	67.6
	> 40	34	32.4	100
Marital Status	Married	53	50.5	50.5
	Unmarried	33	31.4	81.9
	Divorced	19	18.1	100
Education Background	Senior High School and Below	6	5.7	5.7
	Junior College Education	56	53.3	59
	Undergraduate	43	41	100
	District Leaders	12	11.4	11.4
Work Position	Sub-district Leaders	22	21	32.4
	General Prison Guards	71	67.6	100
Working Experience	< 1 Year	11	10.5	10.5
	1-5 Years	19	18.1	28.6
	5-10 Years	29	27.6	56.2
	> 10 Years	46	43.8	100

3.2. Occurrence Frequency and Influence Degree of Work Stressors

According to the statistical analysis of the data obtained through the questionnaire, as shown in Table 2, the five items with the highest frequency of stressors of prison guards in City A are long working hours without guarantee of legal rest time, high risk of work and long-term tension, dull working content, difficulties in managing criminals and depressing working environment. Among the 42 indicators, 31 of them have a frequency of more than 50%, 20 of them more than 70%, and 10 more than 90%. The five items with the highest influential are long working hours without guarantee of legal rest time, high risk of work and long-term tension, feeling guilty for having no time to take care of the family, boring working content, fear of making mistakes in practice and being punished. Among these items, 80% stem from work-related pressure.

Table.2. Occurrence Frequency and Influence Degree of Work Stressors

	Frequency of occurrence			Degree of influence		
	N	%	R	Average	SD	R
B12. Long working hours without guarantee of legal rest time	104	99.05	1	2.88	1.00	1
B15. High risk of work and long-term tension	98	93.33	2	2.25	0.96	2
B13. Boring working content	97	92.40	3	2.23	1.10	4
B14. It's hard to manage criminals	95	90.48	4	1.93	1.12	8
B23. The working environment is depressing	95	90.48	5	1.78	1.20	10
B11. Spare time life is monotonous and tedious	93	88.57	6	2.15	1.17	6
B42. No time to take care of the family, feel guilty	90	85.71	7	2	1	3
B18. Many examinations, competitions and inspections	88	83.81	8	1.62	1.04	14
B9. Low salary and poor welfare	86	81.90	9	2.11	1.05	7
B43. Fear of mistakes in practice and be punished	85	80.95	10	2.17	1.18	5
B16. The punishment for the police was excessive	85	80.95	10	1.93	1.17	9
B24. Poor working environment	85	80.95	10	1.50	1.08	17
B28. Society expects too much of the role of the police	84	80.00	13	1.50	1.10	16
B10. Remote workplace	83	79.05	14	1.75	1.26	12
B17. Low job satisfaction	82	78.10	15	1.65	1.18	13
B27. Not respected by society	82	78.10	15	1.59	1.17	15
B21. Casualties in prison (including suicide)	79	75.24	17	1.78	1.43	10
B36. Work-study conflict	77	73.30	18	1.10	0.99	19
B19. Competition for posts	76	72.38	19	1.20	1.20	18
B39. Temptation of criminals or their families	74	70.48	20	1.03	0.98	23
B37. Few opportunities to continue learning	70	66.70	21	0.99	0.98	26
B26. It's hard to feel involved at work	68	64.76	22	1.09	0.98	20
B34. Lack of knowledge	65	61.90	23	0.96	0.97	27
B35. Lack of self - regulation and counseling ability	64	60.95	24	0.94	1.05	28
B25. Dissatisfied with the work of the leader	60	57.10	25	0.82	0.98	32
B29. The relationship between colleagues is unharmonious	58	55.24	26	0.79	0.95	36
B22. Linking the income with the production efficiency	56	53.33	27	0.84	1.03	31
B32. Poor social skills	54	51.43	28	0.65	0.90	39
B40. Fear of reprisals from criminals and their families	54	51.43	28	1.08	1.29	22
B8. Housing shortage	54	51.43	28	1.09	1.23	21
B33. Tension with criminals	53	50.48	31	0.79	1.14	33
B7. Family financial burden is heavy	51	48.57	32	1.01	1.19	25
B41. The family didn't understand what they were doing	50	47.62	33	0.87	1.08	29
B6. The family was in poor health	48	45.70	34	0.79	0.99	34
B38. Chronic disease	43	40.95	35	0.79	1.12	35
B1. Children's education	39	37.14	36	0.68	1.13	37
B4. Hard to find a boyfriend or girlfriend	38	36.19	37	1.02	1.42	24
B5. Children are young and need to be taken care of	37	35.24	38	0.84	1.23	30
B3. Marital tension	30	28.57	39	0.68	1.20	38
B31. Conflicts between direct leaders	23	21.90	40	0.33	0.76	40
B30. Conflict with the supervisor	7	6.67	41	0.06	0.33	42
B2. Children are unemployed or unemployed	5	4.76	42	0.10	0.52	41
B20. The criminal escaped from prison	0	0.00	43	0.00	0.00	43

3.3. Occurrence Frequency and Influence Degree of Stress Symptoms

After sorting out and analyzing the data collected by the questionnaire, as shown in Table 3, the five stress symptoms with the highest frequency are emotional instability, solving short-term and superficial problems only, headache, prone to getting angry and frequent insomnia. In fact, all of these 15 items have a frequency of above 60%, and 7 of them even surpass 90%. The five most influential stress symptoms are frequent insomnia, delaying or avoiding work, only solving short-term and superficial problems, prone to getting angry and unable to listen to others. It can be seen from the data analysis that the difference of individual attribute exerts marked impact on working stress of prison guards.

Table.3. Occurrence Frequency and Influence Degree of Stress Symptoms

	Frequency of occurrence			Degree of influence		
	N	%	R	N	%	R
C8. Emotional instability	102	97.14	1	1.95	0.74	6
C12. Solving short-term and superficial problems only	99	94.29	2	2.16	1.11	3
C3. Headache	99	94.29	2	2.14	0.92	4
C6. Feel or easily become angry with others	98	93.30	4	1.86	0.90	7
C5. Frequent insomnia	97	92.38	5	2.30	1.05	1
C4. Panic or anxiety	96	91.43	6	2.00	1.06	5
C14. Delay or avoid work	95	90.48	7	2.21	1.17	2
C2. Dyspepsia or stomachache	93	88.60	8	1.48	0.96	10
C7. Feel unable to cope with the surroundings	90	85.71	9	1.62	0.96	9
C10. More lazy than before	88	83.80	10	1.69	1.16	8
C13. Doubt whether anything is worth doing	81	77.14	11	1.25	0.96	11
C15. Have an impulse to drop or destroy something	78	74.29	12	1.19	0.99	12
C9. Unable to listen to others	75	71.40	13	1.10	0.91	13
C1. Lack or increase of appetite	73	69.52	14	1.04	0.89	14
C11. Have the impulse to hit or hurt people	63	60.00	15	0.86	0.89	15

3.4. The Influence of Demographic Variables

The influence of demographic variables on the work stress as shown in Table 4 and Table 5. From the perspective of prison type, the stress level of prison guards working in high alert prisons is much higher than those working in medium alert prisons. As to age groups, the stress levels of prison guards under 30 and over 40 years old are intenser. As regards marital status, the stress level of unmarried prison guards is the highest, and the stress symptoms of divorced prison guards is the most serious. When it comes to education level, there is no obvious difference in its impact on the job stress of prison police. With respect to positions, the workplace stress intensity of prison guards decreases with the rise of personal working positions. Seen from the perspective of working experience, the young prison guards with less than one year of experience have the highest stress intensity; those with 1 to 5 years of experience have the second highest stress intensity; the stress intensity of those with 5 to 10 years of experience is the lowest and those who have worked for more than 10 years ranks in the middle.

Table.4. Score and Variance Test of Samples with Different Variables on Work Stressors Questionnaire

Variable Name	Group	N	Average	SD	Levene's Test	Variance Homogeneity Test	F	Sig.
Prison Types	High alert	31	70.32	16.86	1.690	0.190	5.488	0.000
	Moderate alert	74	47.65	13.78				
Age Distribution	< 25	17	58.88	15.74	0.655	0.582	3.551	0.017
	25 - 30	28	57.71	19.51				
	30 - 40	34	45.53	18.13				
	> 40	26	56.15	16.14				
Marital Status	Married	53	48.98	19.03	0.090	0.914	5.082	0.008
	Unmarried	33	61.42	14.67				
	Divorced	19	52.73	18.34				
Education Background	Senior High School and Below	3	52.00	7.00	2.160	0.121	0.016	0.984
	Junior College Education	52	53.79	20.18				
	Undergraduate	50	53.44	16.93				
Work Position	District Leaders	12	45.25	14.91	1.180	0.311	4.549	0.007
	Sub-district Leaders	22	52.86	22.66				
	General Prison Guards	71	55.20	17.19				
Working Experience	< 1 Year	11	65.27	14.01	0.460	0.711	5.050	0.002
	1-5 Years	19	58.78	15.53				
	5-10 Years	29	48.55	18.85				
	> 10 Years	46	51.78	18.72				

Table.5. Score and Variance Test of Samples with Different Variables on Stress Symptom Questionnaire

Variable Name	Group	N	Average	SD	Levene's Test	Variance Homogeneity Test	F	Sig.
Prison Types	High alert	31	30.16	10.02	0.422	0.657	1.923	0.001
	Moderate alert	74	26.85	7.90				
Age Distribution	< 25	17	28.59	7.01	0.999	0.396	3.837	0.003
	25 - 30	28	25.79	10.13				
	30 - 40	34	23.68	8.13				
	> 40	26	27.34	8.56				
Marital Status	Married	53	25.38	7.61	0.931	0.398	2.066	0.002
	Unmarried	33	27.42	9.61				
	Divorced	19	29.89	9.10				
Education Background	Senior High School and Below	6	25.33	8.50	1.761	0.177	0.491	0.614
	Junior College Education	56	25.65	9.61				
	Undergraduate	43	27.96	7.60				
Work Position	District Leaders	12	26.83	6.98	7.917	0.001	1.923	0.001
	Sub-district Leaders	22	26.31	4.49				
	General Prison Guards	71	27.00	9.85				
Working Experience	< 1 Year	11	30.91	6.39	0.992	0.400	3.398	0.002
	1-5 Years	19	27.84	8.50				
	5-10 Years	29	24.97	10.10				
	> 10 Years	46	27.93	7.43				

4. Conclusion

The study results show that most stressors of prison guards in City A derive from the work level, mainly reflected in the long working hours and high working risk. In prisons lacking severely general police force, the phenomenon of prison guards working overtime is more serious without guarantee of taking some days off work. Because of the particularity of prisons, guards often expose themselves to danger in their work. When prison guards deal with criminals, they frequently meet verbal abuse and self-mutilation of the latter. On that account, prison guards bear immense management pressure. At the personal level, the main source of work stress is “work-family conflict”. The average daily working hours of prison guards generally exceed 10 hours, and they often need to stay on duty in holidays or other special periods. Irregular work and rest rules greatly reduce their time with family members. In addition to daily matters, some emergencies happen from time to time, for instance, when a family member gets sick, the prison guard may fail to take care of he/she due to work. Family squabbles may arise from misunderstanding and complaints. Therefore, family conflicts and self-blame are significant reasons for guards’ unsatisfactory attitude towards work. At the organizational level, the work stressors are mainly reflected in heavy work responsibility and a low sense of achievement. The brief summary of prison work is “high standards and strict requirements”. All prisons in City A are in a state of lacking police force. In prisons with more prisoners and fewer guards than stipulated, guards suffer from greatly increased workload. The working risk is high accompanied by heavy responsibility, in stark contrast, the opportunity of receiving commendation and reward is rather scarce. At the social level, the main source of work stress is that the society expects too much of the role of the prison guards, who are in fact not respected understood by the public. To ensure the safety of prison, most of the information is confidential to the outside world.

Apart from completing myriads of managing and reforming work, prison guards also need to contend with many emergency events. They must stay vigilant to prevent the occurrence of events endangering the safety of supervision, which requires them to be in a working mood of high tension at

all times. Such high-intensity work will often exhaust the police and leave them susceptible to insomnia, irritability, burnout and other various physiological, psychological and behavioral problems. The stress response intensity of prison guards in City A is on the high side. In the underdeveloped City A, the working environment of the prison guards is relatively poor due to the relatively low salary, insufficient equipment and backward regional culture. Additionally, the prison guards themselves fail to take mental health problems seriously, which may lead to the relatively low level of mental health of the prison guards in City A.

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