

Occupational Stress and Burnout among Police Professionals: A Cross-Sectional Study

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Abstract

Background: Police work is widely recognized as one of the most psychologically demanding occupations due to continuous exposure to operational pressures, public expectations, organizational demands, and potentially hazardous situations. Guided by the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, this study examined occupational stress and burnout among police personnel and explored the relationship between these variables.

Methods: A quantitative cross-sectional design was employed among 120 police personnel recruited from an urban police station in Western India using purposive sampling. Occupational stress was assessed using the Occupational Stress Indicator (OSI), while burnout was measured using the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS). Both instruments demonstrated good internal consistency. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, and one-way analysis of variance.

Results: Overall, 73% of participants experienced moderate-to-high occupational stress. Emotional exhaustion (83%) and depersonalization (73%) were the most prevalent burnout dimensions. Role overload and role conflict emerged as the primary occupational stressors. Total occupational stress was strongly correlated with emotional exhaustion ($r = .82, p < .001$) and depersonalization ($r = .74, p < .001$). Significant differences in emotional exhaustion were observed across work shifts ($F = 8.42, p = .001$) and years of service ($F = 5.14, p = .010$), with night-shift personnel and officers with 6-10 years of service reporting the highest levels.

Conclusions: Occupational stress and burnout are highly prevalent among police personnel. The findings highlight the need for organizational reforms, accessible mental health services, and targeted stress management interventions, particularly for personnel working night shifts and those in mid-career stages, to promote psychological well-being and enhance occupational functioning.

Keywords: Occupational stress, burnout, police professionals, emotional exhaustion, Job Demands-Resources model, mental health.

Introduction:

Police work is widely recognized as one of the most stressful occupations. Policing is unequivocally recognized as one of the most stressful civilian occupations due to constant exposure to personal risk, operational unpredictability, excessively long working hours, and high levels of public and political accountability (Violanti & Aron, 1995). Police professionals frequently operate under demanding conditions that necessitate rapid decision-making and the effective handling of life-threatening emergencies. Such chronic occupational demands often create a state of continuous physiological and psychological strain, severely impacting both the physical well-being and mental health of officers (Ganster & Rosen, 2013).

To understand the mechanisms underlying occupational stress and burnout, the present study is guided by the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti et al., 2001). The JD-R model posits that excessive job demands, when not balanced by adequate job resources, initiate a health impairment process that results in occupational stress and, over time, contributes to burnout. In policing, job demands commonly include role overload, role conflict, shift work, prolonged working hours, time pressure, and heightened public expectations, all of which may adversely affect psychological well-being. Within police settings, empirical evidence further indicates that occupational stress frequently arises from role overload, ambiguous or conflicting role expectations, rigid organizational hierarchies, and limited participation in administrative decision-making, factors that may reflect inadequate job

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resources and contribute to psychological strain (Shane, 2010; Suresh et al., 2013). The conceptual framework underpinning the present study is illustrated in Figure 1.

When occupational stress becomes chronic and remains unmanaged, it substantially increases the likelihood of burnout. Burnout is a multidimensional psychological syndrome characterized by three interrelated components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being emotionally overextended and depleted of psychological resources. Depersonalization is characterized by the development of detached, cynical, or impersonal attitudes toward those receiving one's services. Reduced personal accomplishment reflects a diminished sense of competence, effectiveness, and achievement in one's professional role (Maslach et al., 2001). Guided by the JD–R framework, the present study examines how occupational stress is associated with these three dimensions of burnout among police personnel.

In India, police professionals face highly unique and compounded challenges that differ from their Western counterparts. These include severely insufficient staffing, a disproportionately high population burden, chronically extended duty schedules with minimal rest, and a near-total absence of institutionalized mental health support (Savarimalai, et al., 2023; Shah et al., 2018). Despite the severity of these challenges, there remains a significant gap in empirical research exploring the specific nuances of occupational stress and burnout among Indian police personnel. Therefore, applying the JD-R lens, the present study aims to systematically understand the prevalence and interplay of these psychological factors among police professionals working in an urban police setting.

The present study was guided by three primary objectives: first, to assess the levels of occupational stress among police professionals; second, to assess the varying levels of burnout among these professionals; and third, to examine the relationship between occupational stress and the distinct dimensions of burnout.

Research Methodology:

Research Design and Setting

A quantitative, cross-sectional research design was employed to capture a snapshot of the phenomena at a single point in time. The study was conducted at a police station in an urban district of Western India. To maintain institutional confidentiality and protect participant anonymity, the name and identifying details of the police station have been withheld.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The study included a total of 120 police personnel. Of the 145 active-duty personnel approached, 120 agreed to participate, yielding a response rate of 82.7%. A quota sampling technique (a form of purposive sampling) was utilized to approximate the proportional distribution of the station's available workforce, recruiting participants from varying hierarchical ranks and across different operational shifts. The inclusion criteria strictly required that participants be active-duty police personnel currently serving at currently serving in the selected police unit and that they provide voluntary, informed consent.

Tools Used

Data was collected using socio-demographic data sheet and two standardized, self-report psychometric instruments:

Sociodemographic Data Sheet: A structured sociodemographic data sheet was developed by the researchers to collect participants' background and occupational characteristics. The sheet included information on age, gender, educational qualification, marital status, years of service, police rank, and work shift. These variables were collected to describe the study sample and examine their potential association with occupational stress and burnout among police personnel.

The Occupational Stress Indicator (OSI): The 40-item version of the OSI was utilized to measure six distinct dimensions of occupational stress: role overload, role ambiguity, role conflict, group pressure, responsibility, and under participation. For the current sample, the OSI demonstrated excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$).

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI): The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI): The 22-item MBI-HSS, specifically designed for professions involving direct human interaction like policing, was used to assess the three independent dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP), and personal accomplishment (PA). Consistent with MBI scoring conventions, higher EE and DP scores indicate greater burnout, whereas a higher PA score indicates greater personal accomplishment

and therefore lower burnout. The subscales showed good internal reliability for this sample ($\alpha = 0.84$ for EE, $\alpha = 0.78$ for DP, and $\alpha = 0.81$ for PA).

Data Analysis

The collected data was subjected to statistical analysis using descriptive statistics to profile the sample and determine stress and burnout prevalence. Pearson's product-moment correlation analysis was applied to evaluate the strength and direction of the relationships between the stress and burnout variables. Prior to conducting parametric tests, assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variances (Levene's test) were checked and satisfied. Additionally, one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to explore the impact of work shifts and years of service on burnout dimensions, with Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) post-hoc tests applied to identify the specific pairwise between-group differences underlying each significant omnibus result.

Results

Table 1. Sociodemographic Profile of Participants (N = 120)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age (Years)	Mean $\pm$ SD	35.2 $\pm$ 8.4	
Gender	Male	112	93.3
	Female	8	6.7
Educational Qualification	Below Graduate	20	16.7
	Graduate	80	66.7
	Postgraduate	20	16.7
Marital Status	Married	88	73.3
	Unmarried	32	26.7
Years of Service	2-5 years	32	26.7
	6-10 years	48	40.0
	>10 years	40	33.3
Rank	Constable	80	66.7
	Head Constable	24	20.0
	ASI/PSI	16	13.3
Work Shift	Day Shift	40	33.3
	Night Shift	48	40.0
	Rotating Shift	32	26.7

Table 1 presents the sociodemographic characteristics of the 120 police personnel. Participants were predominantly male and most were married. The majority had completed graduate-level education, while smaller proportions had qualifications below the graduate level or postgraduate degrees. Service experience was distributed across early-, mid-, and senior-career personnel, with the largest proportion having 6-10 years of service. Most participants were serving as constables, followed by head constables and Assistant/Sub-Inspectors. Regarding duty schedules, night shifts were the most common work pattern, followed by day and rotating shifts.

Table 2. Occupational Stress Levels Among Police Personnel (N = 120)

OSI Dimension	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum	95% CI
Role Overload	18.70	3.10	10	27	18.14-19.26
Role Ambiguity	14.40	2.70	8	22	13.91-14.89
Role Conflict	17.00	3.30	9	26	16.40-17.60
Group Pressure	12.50	2.40	6	19	12.07-12.93
Responsibility	15.90	2.90	8	23	15.38-16.42
Under Participation	14.10	2.60	7	21	13.63-14.57
Total OSI Score	92.80	14.90	58	126	90.11-95.49

Note: N = 120; CI = confidence interval. Higher OSI scores indicate greater occupational stress. Illustrative interpretation ranges are as follows: Role Overload (0-12 = Low, 13-20 = Moderate, 21-30 = High); Role Ambiguity (0-10, 11-16, 17-24); Role Conflict (0-11, 12-18, 19-27); Group Pressure (0-8, 9-14, 15-21); Responsibility (0-10, 11-17, 18-24); Under Participation (0-9, 10-15, 16-21); Total

OSI Score (≤ 75 = Low, 76-100 = Moderate, > 100 = High). Cut-off values are illustrative and should be replaced with the validated scoring criteria for the specific OSI version used.

Table 2 summarizes the occupational stress levels of the participants. The Occupational Stress Index (OSI) findings indicated that police personnel experienced overall moderate-to-high occupational stress. Among the individual dimensions, role conflict and role overload emerged as the most prominent sources of stress, followed by responsibility and under participation. Moderate levels of stress were also observed for role ambiguity and group pressure. Overall, a substantial proportion of participants reported occupational stress levels within the moderate-to-high range, suggesting that work-related stress was a common experience in the study population.

Table 3. Burnout Levels Among Police Personnel (N = 120)

MBI Dimension	Mean (SD)	Most Frequent Category	Moderate-High Range (%)
Emotional Exhaustion	24.8 (6.0)	Moderate	83
Depersonalization	10.5 (3.4)	Moderate	73
Personal Accomplishment	31.8 (5.6)	Moderate	67

Note: For Personal Accomplishment, a higher score indicates lower burnout; the three MBI subscales are reported independently rather than as a combined total score.

Table 3 presents burnout levels among police personnel. Emotional exhaustion emerged as the most prominent burnout dimension, with the highest proportion of participants falling within the moderate-to-high range. Depersonalization was also observed at moderate levels among a substantial proportion of participants. Because higher scores on the Personal Accomplishment (PA) subscale indicate greater efficacy and lower burnout, the finding that 67% of participants fell within the moderate-to-high PA range is a favourable result, indicating that most officers retained a reasonable sense of professional competence. The remaining 33% who scored in the low PA range represent a smaller, but clinically meaningful, subgroup experiencing reduced personal accomplishment.

Table 4. Correlation Between Occupational Stress and Burnout Dimensions (N = 120)

OSI Dimensions	Emotional Exhaustion r	Depersonalization r	Personal Accomplishment r
Role Overload	.68***	.61***	-.29**
Role Ambiguity	.45***	.39***	-.27**
Role Conflict	.74***	.64***	-.31***
Group Pressure	.41***	.37***	-.25**
Responsibility	.55***	.48***	-.30***
Under Participation	.44***	.38***	-.28**
Total OSI Score	.82***	.74***	-.35***

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 4 shows the correlations between occupational stress and burnout dimensions. All occupational stress domains demonstrated significant positive correlations with emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, indicating that higher occupational stress was associated with greater burnout. Conversely, all stress dimensions showed significant negative correlations with personal accomplishment, suggesting that increasing occupational stress was related to diminished feelings of professional achievement. The overall occupational stress score exhibited the strongest association with emotional exhaustion, followed by depersonalization.

Table 5: Differences in Emotional Exhaustion According to Work Shift and Years of Service (N = 120)

Variable	Category	Mean (SD)	F	p
Work Shift	Day Shift	22.4 (5.2)	8.42	.001
	Night Shift	27.1 (5.8)		

	Rotating Shift	24.2 (6.0)		
Years of Service	2-5 years	23.0 (6.1)	5.14	.01
	6-10 years	26.5 (5.5)		
	>10 years	24.1 (5.9)		

*Note: Tukey's HSD post-hoc comparisons: Night Shift > Day Shift ($p = .002$); Night Shift > Rotating Shift ($p = .03$); 6-10 years > 2-5 years ($p = .008$); 6-10 years > >10 years ($p = .04$). * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < .001$.*

Table 5 presents differences in emotional exhaustion across work shifts and years of service. Emotional exhaustion differed significantly according to both variables. Tukey's HSD post-hoc comparisons revealed that police personnel working night shifts reported significantly higher emotional exhaustion than those working day shifts ($p = .002$) and rotating shifts ($p = .03$), while the difference between day and rotating shifts was not statistically significant. Similarly, personnel with 6-10 years of service demonstrated significantly greater emotional exhaustion than those with 2-5 years of service ($p = .008$) and those with more than 10 years of service ($p = .04$), while the latter two groups did not differ significantly from each other. These findings indicate that both work schedule and professional experience are significantly associated with burnout among police personnel.

Discussion:

The findings of this study indicate a substantial prevalence of occupational stress and specific burnout dimensions among the police professionals surveyed. Aligning with the health impairment pathway of the JD-R model, the data reveals that approximately three-fourths of the sample is operating under high job demands, which is strongly associated with burnout, particularly emotional exhaustion (83%) and depersonalization (73%). These figures align closely with international literature identifying policing as a high-risk profession for psychological distress (Gershon et al., 2009; Kop et al., 1999). As the design is cross-sectional, these associations should be interpreted as concurrent rather than causal or temporally sequenced.

Role overload and role conflict emerged as critical stressors. Police professionals at currently serving in the selected police unit frequently face prolonged work hours, immense administrative backlogs, and continuous pressure from organizational hierarchies. As suggested by Collins and Gibbs (2003), such quantitative and qualitative overload directly overwhelms an individual's coping resources, manifesting as emotional fatigue. Also, officers frequently find themselves caught between conflicting responsibilities, such as the demand to enforce the law rigidly versus the expectation to maintain community relations. Through the lens of the JD-R model, this represents a severe depletion of job resources (autonomy and clarity), fostering cynical, depersonalized attitudes toward the public (Patterson, 2003; Shane, 2010).

The significant negative correlation between total stress and personal accomplishment suggests that the chronic stressors inherent to the Indian policing environment are associated with reduced professional competence for a vulnerable subset of the force. While the mean PA score of 31.8 indicates that the overall sample maintains a moderate level of professional efficacy, which may act as a protective buffer, the 33% of officers reporting low personal accomplishment (rather than the full 67% figure reported in Table 3) represent the critical group struggling to feel effective in their roles.

The inferential statistics reinforced these descriptive observations. The post-hoc results confirmed that night-shift workers and mid-career officers (6-10 years) are significantly more vulnerable to emotional exhaustion than specific comparison groups. This is highly consistent with extensive literature demonstrating that shift work disrupts circadian rhythms and social functioning (Violanti et al., 2017). The mid-career slump likely represents a critical juncture where the initial idealism of early service has faded, yet the accumulation of years of chronic shift work and operational demands has taken a measurable psychological toll.

Finally, the high mean scores on "under-participation" serve as a tentative, exploratory indicator that may be loosely consistent with the lack of job resources described in the JD-R framework. However, because under-participation (feeling excluded from decisions) is conceptually narrower than the instrumental support and autonomy the model specifies, this proxy should be interpreted cautiously. Nonetheless, the data indicates that officers feel they have little voice in administrative decisions.

Research shows that a lack of organizational voice and support is a primary driver of occupational burnout (Lambert et al., 2018; Queirós et al., 2020).

The sample was 93.3% male, and the discussion of results above should be read with this imbalance in mind. Male-dominated organizational cultures and hierarchical norms within Indian policing may shape the expression and reporting of stress differently across genders, and the experiences of the 6.7% of female officers in this sample cannot be reliably generalized from the aggregate findings above.

Limitations and Future Directions:

The findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. The cross-sectional design limits causal inference, and the use of purposive sampling from a single urban police unit may restrict the generalizability of the results. In addition, reliance on self-report measures may have introduced response bias.

Future research should employ longitudinal, multicenter studies with larger and more diverse samples. Further studies should also examine organizational support, resilience, coping strategies, and evaluate interventions aimed at reducing occupational stress and burnout among police personnel.

Conclusion:

The present study concludes that occupational stress and its associated dimensions of burnout are highly prevalent among the participating police personnel. Consistent with the Job Demands-Resources framework, role overload and role conflict acted as detrimental job demands strongly correlated with emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Inferential analysis confirmed that mid-career officers and night-shift workers are particularly vulnerable populations within the force. Because chronic stress destroys individual well-being and degrades policing efficiency, systemic organizational reforms to balance demands with adequate resources are essential for the sustainability of effective law enforcement.

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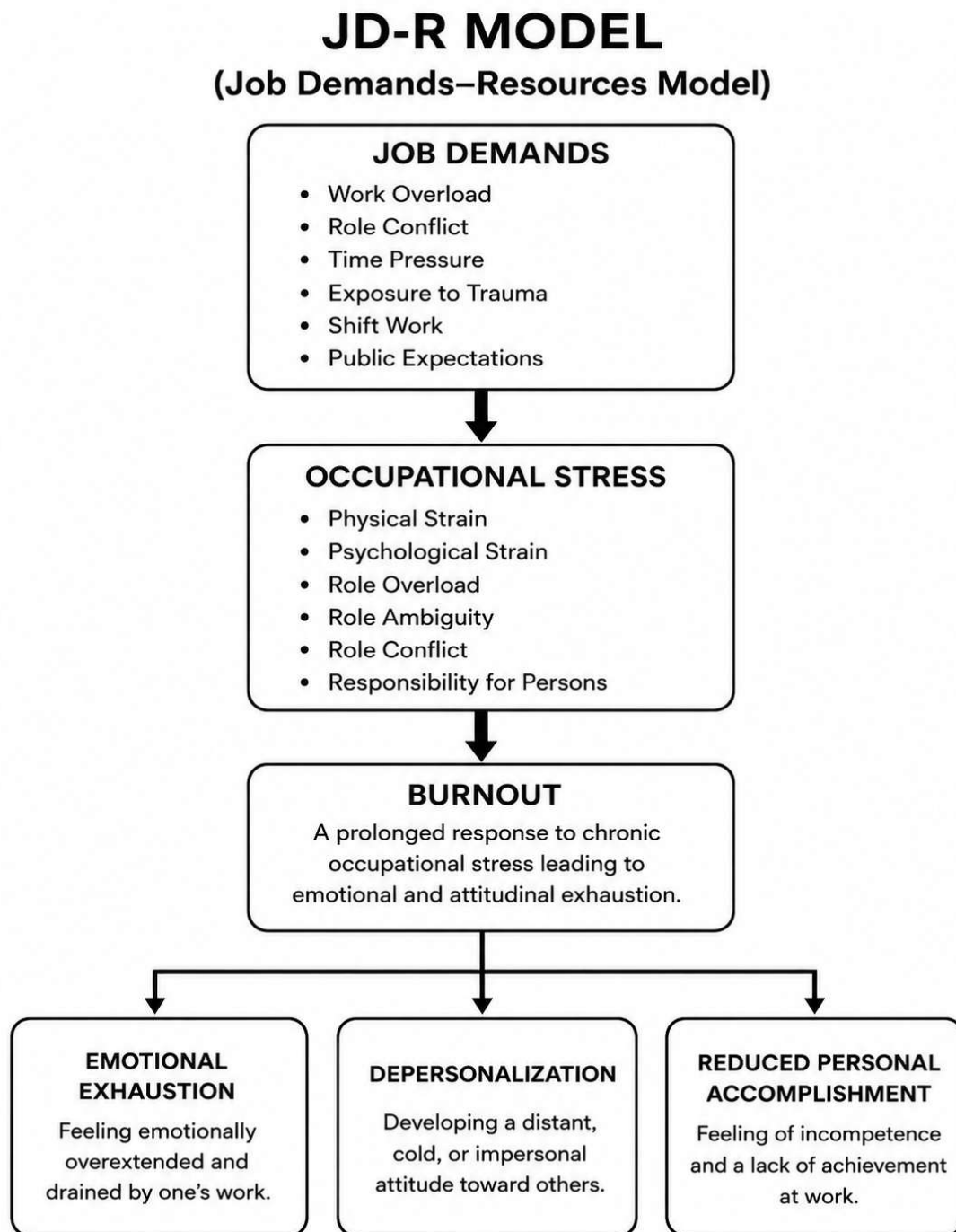
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Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Based on the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) Model



Note. The JD-R model proposes that excessive job demands contribute to occupational stress, which in turn increases the risk of burnout. In the present study, burnout is conceptualized through three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment.