

Job Stress of a Wildlife Conservation Officer

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Abstract: Occupational stress exists in all jobs. Wildlife conservation officers are, by nature of their jobs, subjected to job-related stressors. In order to better understand occupational stress, it is necessary to identify those events that occur in the professional lives, or as a result of the professional lives, of conservation officers. In response to this, all 160 conservation agents of the Missouri Department of Conservation were questioned by 2 separate mail surveys. These questionnaires allowed Missouri's wildlife officers to tell what was stressful to them in their jobs and evaluate these stressful events. Missouri's conservation agents identified and rated 95 events which produced stress in their occupation. These represent the Occupation Critical Life Events Scale for conservation officers in Missouri.

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It is not without some personal understanding of the physical and emotional demands placed upon those working as conservation agents that I undertake this study. After working in the field as a conservation agent for more than 10 years, I feel the pressures bearing on me. The double-ended demands of the public on the one hand and the organization on the other places us all in a stressful situation. I know that substantial stress exists in our occupational lives because I still exist in that environment. At times I have felt that the demands were more than I could meet. I have felt the body pay the toll for long hours, too little sleep and the incessantly ringing telephone. I know that at times the stress debt is high, but as we all have, I will go the distance because we must. We can now being to ask: Is there some way to lessen the burden or to understand this stress we experience? Hopefully, this research is a small step in the right direction to understanding.

Stress has become a major topic for discussion throughout the American public. The word is used so much that confusion exists about the true meaning of the term. For the purpose of this paper, stress will be defined as the result of physical, mental and emotional reactions to situations that cause

fear, uncertainty, danger, excitement, irritation, confusion or change (Forbes 1979). A good way to probably avoid confusion about stress is to use the word stress to mean the body reactions to outside stimulus. The outside causes of these reactions should be more appropriately called stressful events (Oken 1974).

Research has shown that law enforcement officers are subjected to a high level of stress as a result of their occupation. A widely accepted view is that law enforcement officers fall into an occupational category which experiences a higher than average negative physical and emotional reaction to stress. Such reactions would include "diseases of adaptation" like coronary heart disease, ulcers, high blood pressure and digestive disturbance. Psychological reactions, also common, include heavy alcohol consumption, depression, increased marital problems and suicidal tendencies (Sewell 1981a, Selye 1975).

Previous research on stress in law enforcement, which studied the effect of stress on police officers, has found various sources for job-related stress. Kroes et al. (1974) recognized that law enforcement may not be the most physically hazardous job in the world, but it is one of the most emotionally dangerous occupations. Their research with 100 Cincinnati police officers discovered 2 major sources of psychological stress. In one were included those factors arising out of police work itself (line-of-duty/crisis situations, changing shift routines, and isolation/boredom). In the other were individual incidents which threatened the officer's sense of professionalism (court appearances, administrative hassles, poor equipment, and negative community attitudes). They found that the stressors which bother policemen in Cincinnati the most come from the second group. From this it was concluded that police work is a high stress occupation since this set of stressful events is not commonly encountered in other occupations.

Sewell (1981b) also found that the highest levels of stress were generally concerned with violence, personnel matters or professional ethics. He also identified community relations, legal/judicial, administrative, and operational concerns as sources of stressors. These latter categories were stressors of lesser consequence in his study.

Stratton (1978) summarizes stressful events under 4 categories: 1) stressors external to the law enforcement organization, 2) stressors internal to the organization, 3) stressors in police work itself, and 4) stressors confronting the individual police officer.

Generally, much research has been done on stress, and stress in law enforcement has received its share of consideration. However, research has not dealt with wildlife law enforcement officers and their occupational stress. These officers have a special role in the law enforcement community because they experience different emotional and physical pressures than other police

officers. It is important to know about stressful events in their working lives and to what level "diseases of adaptation" afflicts this group of people. This study will examine the sources for stress that are directly related to the occupation of a conservation officer, those stressors which exist because of the organization for which the officers work, and which exist because of the nature of the work they do.

I wish to thank the many who have contributed to this work, but they all cannot be listed here because of space limitations. My special thanks to Chief Earl P. Coleman and Assistant Chief John V. Frye for their loyal support; to Bob King for his interest; to Dan Witter for his technical assistance, without which there would have been no paper at all; and lastly to those conservation agents of Missouri, my wonderful friends, who provided the ingredients for this paper.

Methods

The first order of business in understanding job stress in the lives of conservation officers is to identify those events they perceive as stressful. This research has developed an occupational critical life events scale for conservation officers; more specifically, for Missouri's conservation agents. By allowing the 160 Missouri conservation agents to identify and list specific stressful events they experience as a result of their unique role in law enforcement, a catalog of stressors has been developed. The agents also rated each stressful event numerically, thereby establishing a scale of events ordered in degrees of stressfulness (Sewell 1981b). This scale represents the conservation officers' Critical Life Events Scale.

Since it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to collect data for this study by interviewing all the population, it was necessary to use the questionnaire method for data gathering. Two questionnaires were used for the research project. After the original questionnaire was designed, it was administered in the Northwest Protection Region at a training conference. These agents were allowed to comment on the questionnaire format and instructions. As a result of their suggestions, additional instructions were included in the questionnaire mailed to the remaining agents.

To lay foundation for a discussion about the questionnaires, it is necessary to review some previous research on stress. Holmes and Rahe (1967) used the questionnaire method in developing their Social Readjustment Rating Scale. Their scale used a straight line numerical scale from 1 to 100, with 100 being the most stressful. In the early stages of their research, they recognized that some events were negative or "stressful" in the conventional sense and would be considered socially undesirable. Further, they saw many events as socially desirable and consonant with American values of success and

well-being. However, they identified 1 common theme to all life events. The events usually evoked or were accompanied by some change or alteration of behavior on the part of the involved individual. Sewell (1981b), in his study of law enforcement officers attending the FBI National Academy, used the 100-point scale developed by Holmes and Rahe (1967). He identified 144 stressful events of law enforcement officers with the use of 2 questionnaires. His life events scale contained events which would normally be thought of as positive or good for the individual, but required some adjustment in the normal state of the individual. Both of the research projects illustrate this stress direction. Holmes and Rahe (1967) dismissed it by saying: "The emphasis is on change from the existing steady state and not on psychological meaning, emotion or social desirability." Sewell (1981b) accepted the Holmes and Rahe (1967) rationale and gave little consideration of the positive direction of stress.

Even though this research is based soundly on the works of Holmes and Rahe (1967), and Sewell (1981b), we must deviate from these previous studies. It is important to show stress direction and determine the social desirability of a stressful event. Psychological meaning and emotion will still remain outside the scope of this research.

The 2 questionnaires were designed to show stress direction by using a -10 to +10 rating scale. This allowed respondents to show negative or positive stressful values for each event listed. The first questionnaire contained instructions, personal history data and 55 stressful events that were to be rated. Also, an open-ended question allowed respondents to list and rate events they found stressful on their jobs that had not been covered in the 55 events listed. These first 55 events were compiled by the author, based on his experience of 13 years as a conservation agent.

The personal data page of the first stress questionnaire provided information about each agent's age, race, sex, current marital status, number of previous marriages, years of education, years as a conservation agent and population of the headquarters town. Most importantly, however, were questions about health problems and family problems. Here the agents were able to show incidences of those "diseases of adaptation" that afflicted them.

The 55 events on the first questionnaire were arranged on the form by use of a random numbers table to ensure that events were not clustered by perceived degrees of seriousness on the part of the author. The questionnaire was mailed to all 160 field conservation agents and supervisors in the state. Return postage was included to encourage respondents to return the questionnaires. Of the 160 questionnaires mailed, 122 were returned for a 76% return. This high return percentage on a voluntary response questionnaire spoke plainly of the interest in this research by conservation agents of Missouri.

On the open-ended question that asked agents to list additional stressful events not covered in the first 55, 343 responses were received. From these responses, 40 additional stressful events surfaced. These additional events were compiled into the second questionnaire. Instructions on this questionnaire were to rate these events using the same -10 to +10 scale used on the first questionnaire. Ninety-three of these second questionnaires were returned. A return of 58% again revealed a high level of interest among respondents.

Results

The main purpose of this research was to identify and give magnitude to events that conservation agents saw as stressful in their jobs. The research shows 95 stressful events in the occupation of conservation agents in Missouri. The officers have assessed a value to these stressful events. They are ranked in order of descending negative mean value and ascending positive mean value (Table 1). This is the conservation officers' Critical Life Events Scale for conservation agents in Missouri.

Table 1. Conservation Officer Critical Life Events Scale^a

<u>Event</u>	<u>Value^b</u>
1. Dismissal from department	-7.55
2. Violent death of an agent on duty	-6.85
3. Suicide of an agent who is a close friend	-6.55
4. Shooting someone in the line of duty	-6.31
5. Suspension	-5.98
6. Demotion	-5.45
7. Reduction in pay	-5.44
8. Law enforcement-related civil suit	-5.30
9. Suicide of an agent	-5.17
10. Interference by political official(s) in a case	-5.13
11. Unrealistic expectations of administrators based on lack of consideration of an agent's real social, family and personal life	-4.69
12. Inadequate salary	-4.69
13. Unsatisfactory service review	-4.58
14. Use of alcohol by agent on duty	-4.55
15. Conflict with supervisor	-4.45
16. Written reprimand	-4.14
17. Accident in department vehicle	-4.01
18. Reassignment/transfer	-4.00
19. Lack of close backup	-3.99
20. Political activism by the department	-3.78
21. Inability to solve major case	-3.77
22. Inadequate radio equipment	-3.72
23. Assignment away from family for extended period	-3.64
24. Disruption of normal family lifestyle because of job	-3.60
25. Deer season	-3.59
26. Personal criticism by the media	-3.58

Event	Value ^b
27. Different department expectations for agents and other employees	-3.51
28. Constant "subject to call" status	-3.45
29. Mileage restrictions	-3.41
30. Unfair plea bargain by prosecutor	-3.40
31. Passed over for promotion	-3.33
32. Family abuse because of job	-3.22
33. Investigation of fatal hunting accident	-3.22
34. More work than possible to accomplish without long work hours	-3.31
35. Verbal reprimand	-3.29
36. Contacting a known dangerous violator	-3.28
37. Public demands you can not meet	-3.28
38. Citizen complaint against an agent	-3.20
39. No time off or vacation on major holiday weekends	-3.19
40. Verbal abuse from a violator	-3.13
41. Long hours	-3.01
42. Disciplinary action against an agent/close friend	-2.95
43. Slow information about commission/department activities	-2.94
44. Inadequate patrol vehicle	-2.89
45. Loss of close working, social and personal relationship with various divisions and sections of the department	-2.82
46. Abuse of alcohol by another agent	-2.75
47. Criticism of department by the media	-2.74
48. Dealing with a drunk	-2.71
49. Official telephone in home	-2.70
50. Duty-related accidental injury	-2.68
51. Handling highway-killed deer	-2.60
52. Dealing with nuisance animal complaints	-2.55
53. High speed pursuit driving	-2.47
54. Disciplinary action against another agent	-2.28
55. Work alone	-2.25
56. Size of patrol area	-2.23
57. Present grievance procedures	-2.17
58. Investigation of political/highly publicized case	-2.14
59. Recall to duty on day off	-2.13
60. Duty on major holidays	-1.96
61. Delay in trial	-1.93
62. Providing department office space in home	-1.75
63. Physical arrest of violator	-1.50
64. Service review	-1.42
65. Dealing with armed public (hunters and fishermen)	-1.22
66. Change in supervisory staff	-1.08
67. Monthly reports	-1.06
68. Turkey season	-0.92
69. Reorganization of division	-0.84
70. Assignment with patrol partner of opposite sex	-0.79
71. Change in chief administrators of the department	-0.76
72. Surveys	-0.65
73. Writing a newspaper article	-0.58
74. Court appearance	-0.57
75. Teaching hunter safety	-0.32
76. Maintaining a suitable public image	-0.29
77. Radio and television appearances	-0.10
78. Public meetings	+0.15
79. Impending retirement	+0.16
80. Completion of a special report	+0.22

Event	Value ^b
81. Newspaper interview	+0.36
82. Arresting repeat or hardcore violator	+0.76
83. Interrogation of a violator	+0.89
84. Personal acceptance by public	+1.82
85. Acceptance by supervisors	+2.07
86. Personal acceptance by fellow agents	+2.75
87. Diversity of an agent's overall work assignment	+3.21
88. Working without close supervision	+3.45
89. Flexible work schedule	+3.72
90. Successful clearance of a case	+4.36
91. Administrative recognition (award/commendation)	+4.91
92. Letter of recognition from public	+4.99
93. Promotion	+5.14
94. Pay increase	+5.59
95. Working outdoors	+6.31

^a Life events identified by Missouri wildlife conservation agents as stressful.

^b Mean rank by agents on a scale of -10 to +10.

It is interesting to compare this data with that of previous research (Sewell 1981b). Even though a different rating scale was used, a comparison of the rank order of critical life events showed that conservation agents agreed closely with Sewell's law enforcement officers in 4 of the 5 most stressful events. Sewell's top 5 stressful events were: 1) violent death of an agent on duty, 2) dismissal, 3) taking a life in the line of duty, 4) shooting someone in the line of duty, and 5) suicide of an officer who is a close friend. Beyond these first 5, there was little similarity to stressful events listed or to rank order of the events.

Agents' responses did seem to fit Sewell's stress categories of violence, personnel matters or ethics. The difference being in the number of stressful events in each category. Sewell's research revealed 14 violence-, 8 personnel-, and 3 ethics-related events within the top 25 most stressful events of police officers. Agents listed 4 violence-, 13 personnel-, 1 ethics-, 4 operation/administration-, 1 equipment-, and 2 court-related events. These last 3 categories best describe responses appearing in the agent research (top 25 most negatively stressful events) which did not appear in Sewell's 25 events reflecting the highest level of police stress. Stressful events occurring in these 3 categories were recognized by Kroes et al. (1974). Their research showed that Cincinnati policemen felt courts, administration and equipment categories contained the most stressful events in their jobs. Sewell (1981b) did have operational and administrative categories but responses in these areas were not among the highest stresses noted.

Agents showed strong positive stress values for 9 events. The highest being "working outdoors." At first it may not fit our conventional thinking about

stress or stressful events. We have learned to attach a negative connotation to stress. Reconsidering our definition of stress makes it clear that an event we see as socially desirable can be a stressful event. Working outdoors can produce various degrees of bodily reaction to the stimuli mentioned within the stress definition given earlier. In short, working outdoors can be a significantly stressful situation.

Other events receiving significant values on the positive side of the scale were pay increase, promotion, recognition, work diversity, flexible work schedule and working without close supervision. The personnel theme of the responses in the positive area is consistent with the strong negative end of the scale. In the 9 highest positive events, there are 7 personnel- and 1 court-related stressful events.

Agents indicated 15 stressful events in the top 25 negative stressful events that were internal to the organization. The remaining 10 were those stressors that resulted because of the nature of the work itself. On the positive end of the stressful events scale, the 9 most significant events were divided evenly. Five are work-related and 4 are organizational.

It can be concluded that agents perceive a higher incidence of stressors from events that are related to personnel matters and those events which are inherent to the organization than other police officers. Police officers seem to perceive greater stress, or at least a high incidence of stressful events, from the nature of their work than do agents. Duty-related violence seemed to dominate the most stressful occurrences in the lives of police officers. While violence was considered highly stressful by agents, it did not permeate the entire scale of events as was evident in Sewell's (1981b) scale produced by police officers.

The secondary objective of the study was to determine the level to which "diseases of adaptation" have affected this group. This was accomplished by the personal data sheet of the first stress questionnaire. The respondents were asked if they had suffered from any of a list of several stress-related illnesses since becoming a conservation agent. The most commonly reported were digestive disturbances (38.98%), high blood pressure (14.41%) and hypertension (13.56%) (Table 2).

Agents seem to suffer a higher level of digestive disturbances and high blood pressure, coronary heart disease, colitis, migraine headaches and renal disease than those from Sewell's sample. Ulcers and hypertension were not significantly different.

Finally, the respondents were asked if they had suffered any family relations problems since becoming an agent. If answered yes, they were then asked if the problem had been resolved or did it remain unresolved: 36.75% reported family problems, but had resolved them; 10.26% had experienced family problems that were presently unresolved; and 2.56% indicated family

Table 2. Type of Stress-related Illness Reported in a Survey of 122 Missouri Wildlife Conservation Agents^a

<u>Illness</u>	<u>Have Suffered</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Digestive disturbance	46	38.98
High blood pressure	17	14.41
Hypertension	16	13.56
Migraine headaches	13	11.02
Ulcers	10	8.48
Colitis	8	6.78
Increased alcohol use	7	5.93
Coronary heart disease	4	3.39
Kidney disease	2	1.70
Renal disease	2	1.70

^a Four respondents failed to answer this question.

problems, but gave no indication of resolved or unresolved. Over 49% of the group reported family problems since becoming an agent (Table 3).

The value of this research rests on the identification of occupational events which conservation agents see as stressful to them. The value given to each event identified is meaningful in establishing a ranking of events by perceived magnitudes. Understanding the full implication of a scale like this can come only with further research on conservation agents and job stress.

Sewell (1981a) recognized some practical application of his scale which seems just as valid here. Refinement of the scale and values given each event would allow correlations between a given level of stress and the onset of the "diseases of adaptation." The scale would then have predictive values which would permit administrators to monitor, control and reduce stress whenever possible. Additionally, with better understanding of the stress in the conservation agent's job and reactions to that stress, both administrators and officers can learn to manage the pressures of the profession.

Table 3. Family Problems Reported in a Survey of 122 Missouri Wildlife Conservation Agents^a

<u>Family Problems</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
No	59	50.43
Yes—Resolved	43	36.75
Yes—Unresolved	12	10.26
Yes—But No Resolved Answer	3	2.56

^a Five respondents failed to answer this question.

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