ARE MALAYSIAN POLICE REALLY STRESSED?
UNDERSTANDING THEIR POTENTIAL
STRESS FACTORS

Irniza R¹, S.M. Saliluddin²

¹Department of Environmental and Occupational Health, Faculty of Medicine and Health Science, University Putra Malaysia.
²Department of Community Health, Faculty of Medicine and Health Science, University Putra Malaysia.

*Corresponding author: Irniza Rasdi, Department of Environmental and Occupational Health, Faculty of Medicine and Health Science, University Putra Malaysia, irniza@upm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Background: A large number of studies have been conducted on mental health among police officers but data for Malaysian police are rarely available.

Materials and Methods: This is an archival documentary research that use documents as the research tools. Both hardcopies and online resources were sought from various online databases and related institutions. Relevant information was scrutinised to further understand about mental health status and its potential factors among Malaysian police.

Result: Two articles were published about mental health among Malaysian police. Another three studies were unpublished. Their findings indicated that several groups of police officers were stressed. However, inconsistent method and instrumentation were used in these local studies. Small sample size and different sample and job scope lead to inconclusive and uncertainty ideas about the real situation of mental health among Malaysian police. Information from several reliable documents showed that Malaysian police are facing various stressors throughout their career. However, how far these potential stressors affect their mental health remained to be unexplored. Moreover, the efficiency of the current mental health support in the Royal Malaysian Police (RMP) is yet to be discovered.

Conclusion: Future studies needs to consider the variability of work task among Malaysian police. Instruments to be used to identify stressors among police officers should be more carefully selected which can cover the unique stressors exist in police. Studies on mental health support in RMP is worth to be explored.

Keywords: Mental health, Malaysian police, Royal Malaysian Police
1.0 Introduction

Police officers who are stressed or have stress-related psychological illness may become a risk to the community. This concern is illustrated by the case of a Malaysian police officer who discharged his firearm 58 times without a valid reason (Utusan Malaysia, 2008). The police officer was later diagnosed with a stress-related psychological illness and was admitted to a psychiatric hospital for treatment (Utusan Malaysia, 2008). Since, Malaysian police officers are equipped with firearms and being given certain amount of authority, it is crucial to ensure that such power and dangerous weapon are only managed by psychologically and mentally competent police officers. Knowing their mental and psychological status is fundamental for decision making aimed for achieving optimum health of the Malaysian police officers. Being healthy can minimise judgement errors, violence, power abuse, misconduct, corruption and other undesirable health related outcomes among Malaysian police officers.

Stressors in policing has been identified by several studies in a number of countries to be associated with psychological illness, physiological illness and behavioural problems (Burke & Mikkelsen, 2004; Chen et al., 2006; Gershon, et al., 2009; Maia et al., 2007; Swatt, et al., 2007). In those studies, stressors in policing has been shown to associate with feeling lack of energy, loss of personal enjoyment, increase appetite, has trouble in concentrating; feeling restlessness, sleep disturbances and other stress-related illnesses. Also, work-related illnesses have been found in previous studies in other countries to cause increase days of absences. Absenteeism may impinge on the performance of the Royal Malaysian Police (RMP) as a whole.

Mental health problems in policing may be due to multiple stressors from various aspects. Stressors in policing can be divided into general and specific or unique work factors. The general aspect of police work factors includes managerial structure, policies, work roles, job control, job rank and social support (Carvalho, Cury, & Garcia, 2008; Wiese, Rothmann, & Storm, 2003). The unique police work factors which most other occupation do not have involves the exposure to traumatic events, being the subject of internal affairs investigation, shift work, appearing in court and threat of injury or death, (He, Zhao, & Hen, 2005; Liberman et al., 2002; Patterson, 2003; Pienaar & Rothmann, 2006; Swatt, Gibson, & Piquero, 2007; Zhao, He, & Lovrich, 2002). The significance of these police work factors were varied between studies even in the same countries.

2.0 Research method and instrumentation

This is an archival documentary research that use documents as the research tools. Hardcopies documents were sought from the the Royal Malaysian Police particularly the main RMP library and the department of Welfare, and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Online resources were retrieved via various databases including but not limited to PubMed, Sciences Directs and Scopus. Online resources were limited to those articles dated from 2000 to the most recent. Articles sought were emphasised on local information. International articles were examined to support or explain the findings of Malaysian police officers.
3.0 Studies on mental health among Malaysian police

Although accumulated evidence on the adverse effect of work stressors in policing have been demonstrated in previous studies, these evidence were only limited to some countries particularly the developed countries. Berg et al. (2005), researchers from Norway have pointed out that most of the researches on police stress have been concentrated in the United States of America (USA). Zhao, et al. (2002) acknowledged that rich evidence on the relationship between environment of police work and work-related stress have been accumulated in the USA. Buker and Wiecko (2007), Turkish researchers in police stress claimed that only few studies have been conducted in developing and undeveloped countries.

In Malaysia, so far, there have been only few studies conducted on stress in policing (Mastor, 2009; Peng, 2009). Three studies on mental health status and well-being of the Malaysian police officers were conducted by police officers to fulfill the requirements of completing their studies for the Diploma of Police Science at the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Results from interviews with all 30 police officers in the Crime Department of the Kota Bharu Police Contingent revealed that they suffered from at least a moderate level of work stress (Saini, 2009). In a sample of 60 police officers in the General Operation Force of the Selangor Police Contingent, 59.6% were under stress (Peng, 2009). Similarly, 46.6% of constables and 40.0% higher ranked officers from 50 police officers in the Special Action Unit is classified as having stress (Mastor, 2009). However, all of these studies have only been carried out by using small sample sizes (N≤ 60) which may not be sufficient enough to illustrate the real situation of mental health among Malaysian police officers.

A recent study involving larger sample size (N = 579) of police officers in Kuala Lumpur indicated that the overall prevalence of stress was 38.8% with 5.9%, 14.9% and 18.0% (14.5, 22.2) for severe, moderate and mild stress, respectively (Masilamani, 2013). Results also showed that those who were satisfied with their salaries were more likely to suffer from moderate levels of stress (OR 2.73) than those who were not satisfied with their salaries. Findings of this study give an insight that insufficient salaries is one of the potential stressors for those police officers working in the metropolitan city of Kuala Lumpur. However, findings of this study might not be relevant to the police officers who are working in suburban or rural areas.

Oliver and Meier (2004) agreed that despite of all available researches on stress in policing, there is scarcity of data related to small town and rural police department. Traffic police officers in urban areas, for instance, have to deal with more traffic congestion and for a longer duration than those in rural areas. Urban traffic police officers are exposed to higher level of air pollution and noise due to higher number of vehicles in urban locations. Moreover, rationally urban police officers have been dealing with more crimes due to higher population density than those in rural areas. Therefore, exploring the differences of police work stressors between urban and rural areas adds more information to the current knowledge of police stress.

Moreover, these studies on Malaysian police officers used questionnaires assessing general work factors and failed to explain the police-specific work factors contribute to stress among them. There is only one validated Malay-version police stress questionnaire available to be used to determine the potential police-specific stressors (Irniza Rasdi et al, 2014).
4.0 An overview of the potential stressors among Malaysian police

Although data on mental health among Malaysian police officers is limited, several factors appeared to contribute to work stress among them. An obvious example of a stressor among police officers is the exposure to traumatic incidences. Many Malaysian police officers were killed or injured in the line of duties. In Malaysia, cases of traffic police officers being injured or killed while controlling traffic and chasing offenders were reported in newspapers in almost every month in 2010 (Berita Harian, 2010; Utusan Malaysia, 2010; Wan Faizal Ismayatim, 2010; Wan Noor Hayati Wan Alias, 2010). In a recent tragedy, a female police officer died after being run over by a reckless motorcyclist in Johor (Utusan Malaysia, 2015). A member of the police motorcycle patrol unit was killed and another was seriously injured when the motorcycle they were on, was rammed by a car driven by a robber at Perak (Utusan Malaysia, 2014). Another three police officers were injured while trying to control an assembly in Kuala Lumpur (Berita Harian, 2015).

Moreover, Malaysian police are also exposed to cross-boundaries violence. For example, in 2013, five policemen, one of them an officer, were killed in an ambush by armed intruders from Philippines in Semporna, Sabah (Mohd Asrun Mustaffa, 2013). Later, a marine police officers were killed and one was kidnapped by trespassers in the same state (Berita Harian, 2014b). Likewise, in 2009, 205 compensation claims for occupational-related deaths and 98 compensation claims for occupational-related injuries with permanent disabilities were lodged by Malaysian police officers (Royal Malaysian Police, 2010).

Apart from the traumatic incidences, mental health of Malaysian police officers might have been affected by the administrative problems in the Royal Malaysian Police, as was identified and reported upon by the Royal Commission to Enhance the Operation and Management of the Royal Malaysian Police (RCR) (The Royal Commission to Enhance the Operation and the Management of the Royal Malaysian Police, 2005). The Royal Commission made 125 recommendations to improve RMP. Step taken to implement the recommendations have yet be made public. The Royal Commission found that the RMP management system failed to manage resources effectively. Equipment was inadequate, outdated and not well-maintained. Also, the RMP failed to manage employee remuneration effectively (The Royal Commission to Enhance the Operation and the Management of the Royal Malaysian Police, 2005).

Moreover, the management system in the RMP was reported by the RCR to be ineffective in providing police personnel with the skills necessary for their duties due to lack of training and development and support facilities (The Royal Commission to Enhance the Operation and the Management of the Royal Malaysian Police, 2005). According to Johnson and Hall (1988) in the Job Demand-Control Support Model and Palmer, Cooper, and Thomas (2004) in the Model of Work Stress, doing job without adequate skills and resources is harmful to the health and well-being of employees. The lack of skills and knowledge is also reported by the RCR to be the main factors leading to the culture of breaking and bending rules (The Royal Commission to Enhance the Operation and the Management of the Royal Malaysian Police, 2005).

Non-compliance with rules persists at all level in the RMP and encourages the alleged demands of bribes among Malaysian police officers (The Royal Commission to Enhance the Operation and the Management of the Royal Malaysian Police, 2005). In 2010, from a survey,
the RMP was perceived by the Malaysian general population to be the most corrupt (4.1/5.0) organisation in Malaysia followed by political parties (4.0/5.0) and Parliament (3.4/5.0) (Transparency International Malaysia, 2010). Such negative public perception and public criticism should have been put extra pressure to the Malaysian police officers as demonstrated by previous findings of police officers in other countries (Garcia, Nesbary, & Gu, 2004; Moon & Maxwell, 2004; Scott, 2004).

Moreover, the government of Malaysia is taking comprehensive effort to reduce the crime rate in Malaysia by increasing the presence of police especially in hotspot areas and organising special police operations. According to the Malaysian Well-being Report 2013, during the period 2000 to 2012, the public safety index improved by 25.6 points due to the reduction in both the crime rate and road accidents indicators (Economic Planning Unit, 2013). This accomplishment will not be achieved without the continuous effort of police officers as the main enforcement body in Malaysia. Such effort increase the amount of workload among Malaysian police officers which subsequently put extra pressure among them.

5.0 Mental health support in the Royal Malaysian Police.

Malaysian police officers can only commence their career after passing physical and psychological health tests prior to recruitment (Unit of Employee Recruitments, 2009). However, one major drawback in the health and welfare management system in the Royal Malaysian Police is that, apart from the pre-recruitment health screening, there is no routine follow-up health examination for police officers (Royal Malaysian Police, 2010b).

In 2007, the Bahagian Agama dan Kaunseling (BAKA) (the Section of Counselling and Religion) was formed for the management of mental health and well-being in the Royal Malaysian Police (Royal Malaysian Police, 2010). Counsellors and officers from BAKA provide counselling, religious talks for Muslims, training, short courses, seminar and workshops for the police officers. There is no spiritual enhancement offered for non-Muslims. BAKA was expanded throughout Malaysia in 2008 (Royal Malaysian Police, 2008). In 2009, this department is staffed with 791 counsellors and ‘Ustaz’ (qualified officers for giving religious talk) for all 102,037 police officers in Malaysia (Royal Malaysian Police, 2010). During this year 989, counselling sessions were conducted and 294 police officers completed the Discipline and Self Endurance courses throughout Malaysia (Royal Malaysian Police, 2010).

BAKA also collaborates with the federal Psychology Management Division under the Public Service Department of Malaysia. The Psychology Management Division is responsible for formulating policies and providing guidelines for counselling practices and services (Psychology Management Division, 2010). This Division also provides psychological services for government servants including Malaysian police officers (Psychology Management Division, 2010). Close relatives of the Malaysian police officers can also apply for this service for free. These services include psychological testing, counselling, prevention and spiritual enhancement, negotiation, counselling skill and career guidance (Psychology Management Division, 2010).
6.0 Conclusion and recommendation

Malaysian police appears to have been suffering various work stressors which put them at a high risk to get mental health illnesses. More comprehensive studies on mental health among them are therefore warranted. Future studies needs to consider the variability of work task among Malaysian police. Stressors among police working in commercial crime for example might not be relevant for the traffic police. Therefore, a more specific study exploring on stressors in different units of police officers are more meaningful. Instruments to be used to identify stressors among police officers should be more carefully selected which can cover the unique stressors exist in police. Moreover, studies shall not only focus on the prevalence and factors of stress among police officers. The efficiency of mental health support in the Royal Malaysian Police is worth to be explored.

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Declaration

Author(s) declare that this is an original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged.

Authors contribution

Author 1: Irniza Rasdi; Grant writing, conceptual framework of the study, data collection.

Author 2: Suhainizam Muhamad Saliluddin; Data collection, research methodology.

References


