

# Does raising the terrorism alert level cause undue stress?

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The U.S. Department of Homeland Security's color-coded system for warning the public of the risk of a terrorist attack does not appear to cause undue stress among law enforcement officers, according to a study by researchers at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey.

A review of calls to New Jersey's Cop 2 Cop crisis intervention hotline found no statistically significant increase in calls with periods of increased alert. The study is published in the March 18, 2008 issue of the International Journal of Emergency Mental Health and is among the first to examine the psychological impact of the alert system on first responders.

“With regard to New Jersey law enforcement, we did not find any evidence to support the concern that elevating the alert status places undue stress on those receiving the alert,” said one of the study's authors, George S. Everly, Jr., PhD, a psychologist with the Bloomberg School's Center for Public Health Preparedness. “We believe these findings are an important first step in addressing concerns that policy makers may have for using such an alert system. In order to more fully address this issue, our study needs to be replicated with groups other than law enforcement, especially the civilian population.”

The Cop 2 Cop crisis hotline was established by the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey to provide counseling to police officers in the state. New Jersey officers were selected for the study as a

group because of their experiences with the 2001 terrorist attacks. The research team analyzed call data from September 9, 2002, to January 30, 2004. During that time, the Homeland Security national alert level was raised five times from yellow (elevated) to orange (high).

According to the study, the hotline received 4,145 initial calls during the study period. Of these, 1,062 occurred during the alert periods. Analysis showed a substantial increase in calls to the Cop 2 Cop hotline around the second anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. However, the researchers did not detect a pattern of increased calls corresponding to an elevation in the alert level compared with the week preceding the alert period.

Source: Johns Hopkins University

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