

Differences in how male, female police officers manage stress may accentuate stress on the job

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When male police officers need to de-stress, they might trade war stories -- but likely not with their female colleagues.

But the guys don't necessarily have it easy. They are often discouraged from showing emotion when dealing with stress and are expected to uphold the overtly masculine idea of what it means to be a police officer.

Research by a Kansas State University professor has found that the different ways in which men and women in the police force deal with stress may actually cause them more stress. Don Kurtz, an assistant professor of social work at K-State, studied the gender differences in stress and burnout among police officers. The work was published in the journal *Feminist Criminology* in 2008, <http://tinyurl.com/c2p2et>

He said it is the first of his research that has examined gender. While completing his doctorate at K-State, Kurtz said he was taking classes on gender and society and was researching police stress. He noticed that there was no research studying the intersection of these two areas.

"I had come from working in social work, where they were very accepting of men in the women-dominated field," Kurtz said. "In policing, they tend to be suspicious of the abilities of women in the field."

For the research published in *Feminist Criminology*, Kurtz looked at data from a survey of officers in the Baltimore Police Department. As a follow up to this part of the research, Kurtz also interviewed officers from three police departments. He found that male and female police officers have different sources of stress and different ways of dealing with it.

"Telling war stories is almost exclusively a male endeavor," Kurtz said. "It's quite often in a group social setting, and officers talk about stressful events that happened. What's interesting is that they remove the fear and emotion that go along with it and replace it with these superhuman qualities."

"I found that women felt excluded from war stories. If they started exaggerating the stories in the way that men did, they could be questioned. So it becomes a male-only way of managing stress."

In the journal article, Kurtz suggests that in some ways women have a better chance to deal with violent cases because it's more acceptable for women to be upset or vulnerable.

"For male officers to show emotion, it was career suicide," he said.

Some of the cases that men find the most stressful, Kurtz said, were likely to be given to women.

"One thing I found interesting was that when officers discuss the most stressful things, it's usually death of a child or the physical or sexual abuse of a child," he said. "Women are more likely to handle these jobs because large police departments often assign women to these investigative units. However, it's often seen as lower police work. In large departments where there are a lot of juvenile delinquents and child abuse cases, there's an idea that women are better at managing kids."

One of the biggest differences Kurtz found was the role that family played in police officers' stress. Whereas a family life can help male officers deal better with stress from the job, women may not have the same support in their own families.

"Women settle into the role of caretaker and come home to a second shift," Kurtz said.

The strange hours of police work can be seen as more acceptable for men than women, he said.

"Although family conflicts can be distressful for men, the fact that a male officer is seen as the breadwinner makes it more OK for him to miss a birthday party, for example, so he can go to work."

Kurtz also looked at how race changes the stress differences between men and women.

"We should expect a difference," he said. "In American society, race complicates everything."

For instance, white female officers are more likely to be sexualized, whereas black female officers are often seen as laborers. And, while black male officers report lower levels of stress than white men, they also report a higher rate of burnout.

Kurtz said he hopes his research will help police departments better understand how gender affects stress and that it will spur further academic study in this area.

Source: Kansas State University

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