

STRESS MANAGEMENT OF CORRECTIONAL PERSONNEL IN THAILAND

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I. INTRODUCTION

According to the organizational structure of the Ministry of Justice, there are three core organizations responsible for behavioural rehabilitation: the Department of Corrections, the Department of Juvenile Observation and the Department of Probation. These counterparts in law enforcement can experience a great deal of job-related stress in various levels of stress.

When compared with their counterparts, Prison Officers experience higher levels of stress due to their work environment; they work in a controlled environment which can be dangerous, unpredictable and includes crisis situations like fighting among prisoners, attempted homicide, medical emergencies, personal threats and prison lock down.

Moreover, correctional officers face a number of sources of stress particular to their field including organizational factors such as working in shifts, and conflicting, and ambiguous roles at work. Also they suffer from the nature of prison work such as exposure to violence which can affect the official's ability to engage in custodial treatment or facilitate treatment programmes for offenders. In addition, the evidence indicated that the levels of stress may have increased in recent years due to correctional system problems such as prison overcrowding, understaffing, the impact of globalization, technological development and social modernization.

II. CURRENT SITUATION AND PROBLEMS IN REGARD TO STRESS AMONG CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS

A. Literature Review

Over the last decade, there have not been many studies on work-related stress among Thai correctional officers nor have there been the studies addressing levels of stress, causes of stress, effects of stress including sick leave, early-retirement, mental and physical problems, perception of security, impact of working in shifts, etc. Moreover, the results of any studies have failed to address which factors cause stress or the stress levels of the Thai corrections officers.

One study has shown that most prison officers in the Bangkok area had low levels of job stress: however, responsibilities, genders and positions caused significant differences in stress levels. Gender also led to significantly different coping styles; moreover, female prison officers used more of the functional emotion-focused coping style than their male counterparts (Onanong, 2001).¹ However, demographic factors including age, marital status, income, income to expense ratio, period of work, work section, family responsibility and organizational factors had no correlations with stress level (Rattchavadee, 2004).² In addition, for the work-related stress of supervisors and coworkers work environments are significantly correlated to level of stress (Vunpen, 2001).³

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¹Onanong Wangmano, *Job Stress and Coping Behaviors of Prison Officers in Bangkok* (Thesis, Rankamheang University, Bangkok, 2001).

²Rattchavadee Nimitkasemsupak, *The Use of Healthtron for Reducing Occupational Stress in the Correction Officers* (Thesis, Mahidol University, Bangkok, 2004).

³Vunpen Vongvaikittisin, *Factors related to the stress of custodial staffs in prisons and correctional institutions: a case study of the prisons located in the Bangkok Metropolitan*. (Thesis, Nida, Bangkok, 1998).

In terms of perception of risk level, there is a significant correlation between demographic factors of gender, marital status, education, income, work experience, and professional training, and the perception of risk level in terms of risk of mental disturbance, risk of infectious disease and risk of personal threat (Manu, 2000).⁴

B. Addressing Stress Among Correctional Officers

Currently, there is no research on significant factors indicative of stress such as sick leave, suicide, turnover, absenteeism, psychosomatic disorder, etc. However, in order to address stress among correctional officers, it is necessary to consider the circumstances. In recent years, there are several circumstances that may have created increased stress for Thai correctional officers. The significant sources of stress help to predict what the level of stress among correctional officers will be.

1. Prison Overcrowding Problem

Overcrowding is considered as the most significant problem in Thai corrections which creates a variety of negative physical and psychological responses. The number of prisoners has continued to rise over in the last decade despite the royal pardons: over the last three years, the prison population went up by 24.61%: 1 October 2010 (210,315), 1 October 2011 (212,441), 1 October 2012 (242,989). As of 1 April 2013, the prison population was 262,077 (Table 1). As a result of prison overcrowding, correctional officers face increasing levels of stress: for example, work-overload such as head counts, searching and paper work.

Prison overcrowding has created problems within prison facilities such as at the canteen, visitation rooms, showers and toilets, schools and vocational training facilities, and sports and recreation facilities. For example, nowadays, because of low capacity at the canteen, many prisons need to provide meals within a limited time frame; the same is true with use of the shower facilities. These time limitations can increase tension and stress among inmates and correctional personnel as well as increasing of the number of unpredictable situations.

2. The Understaffing Problem

As a government agency, the Department of Corrections needs to comply with the government's policy of decreasing the number of public servants despite facing overcrowding. Even though the department has sufficient manpower, it has been in a crisis situation in terms of the ratio of the inmate population to the size of prison staff.

It can be said that Thailand is one of the countries that has a very high ratio of prisoners to prison staff. Moreover, the proportion of prisoners to prison staff is increasing. Table 1 shows the prison population over the last decade.

⁴Manu Thuamthong, *Opinions of Personnel under the Department of Corrections in Phranakhonsriyutthaya Province to the Risks from Working*, (Thesis, Turakitbandit University, Bangkok, 2000).

TABLE 1

The Ratio of Number of Staff to Prisoner Population

Year	Number of Staff	Prisoner Population	Ratio
2003	10,891	211,475	1: 19.41
2004	11,030	209,811*	1: 19.02
2005	10,978	168,040	1: 15.17
2006	11,073	161,886*	1: 14.61
2007	11,029	153,405*	1: 13.90
2008	10,746	174,381	1: 16.22
2009	10,877	186,625	1: 17.15
2010	10,714	210,315*	1: 19.62
2011	10,689	212,941*	1: 19.92
2012	10,549	242,989*	1: 23.03
2013	10,677	262,077**	1: 24.54

*In fiscal years 2004, 2006, 2007, 2010, 2011, and 2012, there were corrective royal pardons

**as of 1 April 2013

The understaffing problem can create a variety of stresses among correctional officers such as workload and overtime. For instance, a lack of psychologists, medical personnel and social workers, forces correctional personnel to work as such in a professional role. In addition, staff are responsible for on-call duty due to serious illnesses of inmates which need medical care in hospitals. These can be causes of stress among correctional officers due to the unpredictable night-shift schedule as well as their family schedules.

3. Conflicting and Ambiguous Roles

Correctional officers have to engage in custodial responsibilities (maintaining security, such as preventing escapes, inmate fights and providing prisoner discipline) as well as engage in rehabilitation responsibilities (providing vocational training, education and rehabilitation programmes). It was found that those conflicting duties cause stress between coworkers and also the officers themselves. For instance, practically, it has frequently been an argument between officers working in prisoner-custody sections and education sections in relation to the operation of their activities. From first-hand experience, this can be a serious problem between correctional officers and coworkers.

4. Stress Caused by Factors External to the Organization

In Thai culture, poor public image is not a serious problem because public service, including working as correctional officers, is seen by the community as an honoured profession. However, the community attitude towards prison work is negative; especially, the media can strongly influence the public attitude; the prisons have been presented as places of harsh punishment, poor hygiene and corrupt management. Additionally, prison officers face public doubts in regard to non-custodial treatment such as parole, probation and royal pardons as well as the effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes. Thus, working in prison is recognized as a thankless job. Even if you have done a great job, you will not likely have the appreciation of the community.

Moreover, in regard to the government's policy on drug suppression, drug offenders are likely to receive the most severe punishment which leads both offenders and correctional officers to experience high levels of stress. In addition, nowadays, the evidence has shown that prisoners have creative methods of concealing cell phones and related contraband; they even engage in drug smuggling. These circumstances combined with overcrowding and understaffing can create excessive stress among

correctional officers.

5. Facts that Illustrate Stress among Correctional Officers

Practically, sick leave is significantly correlated to levels of stress. It has been found that officers working extensive night shifts and overtime have often taken sick leave. In this case, it caused stress to coworkers in terms of uncertain work schedules.

Nevertheless, it has been found that not many correctional officers refuse overtime or night shifts despite the fact that they have had such long working days including 8 hours of work and then 16 hours for the night shift with only a one-and-a-half-hour break because they receive benefits from overtime and night-shift duty in terms of extra income and a healthy work environment (fewer supervisors), less inmate interaction, etc.

Burnout is a common problem among correctional officers who feel ignored and lack motivation, especially for the officers who have been working in the same prison for a long time — and lack of promotion as well. They have frequently said that the department is concerned with the prisoner much more than prison officers.

III. PROBLEM SOLVING IN REGARD TO STRESS AMONG CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS

A. Supportive Manpower

There are no specific training programmes on stress management. However, the Department realizes that correctional personnel are the key mechanism to successfully drive the organization towards its ends. The Department has made many efforts to improve the quality of its human resources.

The disproportion of staff and inmates* (1:23, Table 1) has been recognized as a major obstacle of prison management and also has had a significant impact on staff. In the past, it would have caused an argument by having temporary employees perform prison work, but this practice has become a helping hand. At present, there are 1,571 temporary employees performing their work in correctional institutions throughout the country which can assist prison staff to perform general administration.

B. Prison Standards

In 2006, the Department launched the Prison Standards, which establish a physical and working mechanism model for 10 aspects of operations for all prisons. The goal of the Prison Standards is to achieve the acceptance of three parties, namely the prisoners, the correctional officers and the community.

Every prison and correctional institution is required to improve its conditions to achieve the Standards which are aimed directly at reducing sources of stress among correctional officers, for example: every prison is required to do manual operations for various duties to ensure that the officers can respond to their various responsibilities. These can reduce such causes of stress for the fear of doing “something wrong” and of being criticized or investigated. The circumstances revealed that the Prison Standards have caused a significant change in the prison administration as well as the quality of lives of staff.

C. The Improvement of Quality of Life of Correctional Personnel

One of those Standards is the Standard for Qualified Staffs. The Department of Corrections required all prisons and correctional institutions to provide various activities which can be referred to as stress management techniques, for example: a complaint system, an effective communication system and a counselling system in order to promote cooperation and good relationships between the superintendent and staff, provide sufficiency training to new staff, professional-level training and special programmes.

Furthermore, in order to achieve Standards for Physical Plants, all prisons and correctional institutions are required to improve their prison facilities for staff and inmates, for example: providing learning centres, recreation areas, control rooms, standard barriers, sufficient tools and equipment for

working, etc.

D. Dharma Practices for Prison Staff

Since Buddhism is the main religion of most Thai people, dharma practices are significant activities for encouragement of prison staff morality. There have been varieties of dharma activities carried out such as the Following Royal Footsteps Project and the Prison as Home of Dharma Project.

As part of the main activity of the Prison as Home of Dharma Project, the meditation programme has represented its significance as relaxing activities for prison staff because meditation is recognized as one of the stress management techniques. The department has regularly carried out this project for 2-3 sessions a year, in addition, the director of prisons and correctional institutions may have his or her own dharma activities for staff. These are very simple and helpful activities for reducing the stress of prison staff.

E. Promotion of Self-Sufficiency Philosophy

His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej developed the philosophy of the Sufficiency Economy to lead his people to a balanced way of life and to be the main sustainable development theory for the country. The philosophy implies morality and ethics which are essentially required in correctional work. Accordingly, the Department has adapted the virtues of “self-sufficiency economy” for the management of prisons which are applied in three dimensions: the self-sufficiency life of staff, the self-sufficiency life of prisoners after release and the administration of organization based on the self-sufficiency economy.

The department has tailored eight activities for the officers who desired to join this programme: he/she must (1) be self-sufficient in terms of balancing living costs; (2) perform his/her duty effectively and transparently; (3) promote activities of his/her family in order to enhance happiness and morality; (4) not participate in gambling; (5) be experienced in promoting unity among correctional officers; (6) be a healthy person in terms of exercising and practicing personal health care; (7) promote the learning network among correctional officers; and (8) be concerned with the environment. The programme activities will be helpful for staff in many ways such as providing guidelines for decision-making, learning to live without greed or overexploitation, and being able to cope appropriately with critical challenges.

IV. CHALLENGE OF STRESS MANAGEMENT AMONG THAI CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS

It can be a challenge to manage a diverse group of correctional officers who have to work under difficult circumstances that affect their mental and physical well-being. Even though we can identify the sources of stress among correctional officers, stress management is not as easy as it sounds. Behaviours for coping with stress are unique and can be experienced in different ways. There is no single method that works for everyone or in every situation. Remarkably, many of the problems the international correctional system experiences are similar to what we are experiencing in Thai corrections despite differences in organizational structures and work environments.

Moreover, in Thai culture, conflict and displays of anger are eschewed; thus, Thai people often deal with disagreements and conflict. These can be both advantages and disadvantages for stress management. It can be an advantage in coping with stress in terms of avoiding stress. On the other hand, it can be a disadvantage in identifying the sources of stress, because they often keep quiet even if feeling uncomfortable.

Also significant to Thai culture is that hierarchy and seniority must be recognized and respected in any relationship, even in the workplace. Thus, senior officers can be helpful, and the relationships between staff might be like family members. There should be more internal programmes such as mentoring.

Thus, some successful programmes such as stress counselling, family counselling, de-briefing at the workplace, counselling by psychologists, and individual counselling might not have been successful in the Thai correctional systems. On the other hand, some programmes can be practical and useful in Thai

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corrections, such as anger management training, problem solving and decision-making training, communication skills training, time management training, regular exercise, relaxation exercise, meditation, yoga, prayer and other forms of relaxation and paid holidays.

Furthermore, there are various supportive circumstances operating in Thai public organizations which can be adapted to stress management programmes among correctional officers such as stress management for pensioners which is an effective health programme. Remarkably, such a successful programme was not tailored to correctional officers who routinely face stress.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the current situation of Thai corrections in regard to stress management among correctional officers is ongoing improvement. The evidence has shown that the Department of Corrections has experienced stress among Thai correctional officers and also has operated various projects in order to reduce sources of stress. Additionally, levels of stress may have increased in recent years due to correctional system problems such as prison overcrowding, understaffing, the impact of globalization, technological development and social modernization.

It is clear that stress management can help prevent and relieve stress, which can have valuable benefits for correctional administrators. Therefore, stress management among correctional personnel should be initiated and needs to address the stress among correctional officers caused by the corrections organization itself including Thai culture. In addition, it will be key to the success of the programme to convince correctional administrators and officers that they can benefit from the programme not only at work but in their daily lives.

Reference

Peter Finn, *Addressing Correctional Officer Stress Programs and Strategies*, National Institute of Justice, December 2000.
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