

Stress and the New South Wales Police Force: The prevalence of various coping mechanisms

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Background: Policing is romanticised as a stressful occupation, wherein officers abuse alcohol and drugs to 'cope'. There is a higher incidence of physical and mental disorders within policing attributable to stress; however, contention exists as to which coping strategies police are employing. Hence, the aim of this project is to identify the prevalence of coping mechanisms in police officers and its relationship to their perception of stress.

Methods: Data was obtained from 235 general duties police officers (164 males; 31.20 ± 8.53 years) after attending ten local area commands across New South Wales (NSW). Subjects were asked to complete a questionnaire battery which included the Revised Ways of Coping Questionnaire (WCQR) and the Lifestyle Appraisal Questionnaire (LAQ). Salivary samples were collected before and after shift, to be analysed for cortisol via high-performance liquid chromatography mass spectrometry (HPLC-MS).

Results: Preliminary exploratory analysis identified 33% of subjects reporting perceptions of stress which were worse than normal ranges (values drawn from the LAQ). The most prevalent coping mechanisms (WCQR) were planful-problem solving (60.13%) and seeking social support (52.92%), while confrontive coping (44.83%) and escape-avoidance (41.41%) were the least frequently employed. Further, lower planful-problem solving ($r=-0.23$, $p<0.01$) and higher escape-avoidance ($r=0.48$, $p<0.001$) coping strategies were significantly correlated with greater perceptions of stress. Salivary cortisol HPLC-MS is currently being conducted.

Conclusions: Based on preliminary findings, the majority of police officers' perceptions of stress are equal to or better than the general public, and this is likely due to the higher prevalence of approach-based behavioural coping strategies. However, further research is required to determine whether these positive coping mechanisms are inherent or learned. The outcomes of this study have the potential to improve stress management and reduce the disease burden attributable to stress, thereby directly benefitting the NSW Police Force and subsequently the wider community.