



ANALYSIS OF WORKPLACE STRESS AND ITS EFFECT ON EMPLOYEE PRODUCTIVITY IN THE MALAWI POLICE SERVICE

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ABSTRACT :

In every fast-paced surrounding, stress is present in every life aspect, including at the workplace. It is a deeply personal experience, with various stressors affecting every individual differently. Workplace stress has become a significant concern in contemporary organizational settings, particularly in high-stakes environments such as law enforcement. The Malawi Police Service (MPS), tasked with maintaining public safety and order, faces unique challenges that contribute to elevated stress levels among its employees

Workplace stress is a significant occupational hazard among police officers worldwide. In the Malawi Police Service (MPS), stress is compounded by resource constraints, heavy workloads, and organizational challenges. This paper analyses the nature of workplace stress in the MPS, its impact on employee productivity, and potential interventions. Drawing on international literature and Malawi-specific case studies, the article highlights both operational and organizational stressors, showing how they undermine cognitive functioning, motivation, health, and performance. Findings reveal that organizational stressors such as inadequate equipment, unclear appraisal systems, and low remuneration are especially salient in Malawi. The paper concludes with recommendations for systemic reforms and future research to address workplace stress and enhance productivity in the MPS.

Keywords: workplace stress, productivity, Malawi Police Service, organizational stressors, occupational health

Introduction

Workplace stress has become a significant concern in contemporary organizational settings, particularly in high-stakes environments such as law enforcement. The Malawi Police Service (MPS), tasked with maintaining public safety and order, faces unique challenges that contribute to elevated stress levels among its employees. This paper aims to analyze the effects of workplace stress on employee productivity within the MPS. Understanding this relationship is crucial for developing strategies to enhance employee well-being and operational efficiency.

1.2 Background of the topic

Law enforcement is widely recognized as one of the most stressful occupations due to constant exposure to trauma, threats to personal safety, and high-pressure decision-making. The Malawi Police Service (MPS) operates under particularly challenging conditions marked by resource shortages, organizational inefficiencies, and socio-economic pressures (Violanti et al., 2017). These stressors undermine not only the Wellbeing of officers but also their capacity to deliver quality policing services.

The combination of operational stressors (e.g., violent incidents, traumatic scenes, shift work) and organizational stressors (e.g., inadequate resources, poor supervision, unclear promotion/appraisal systems) has been linked internationally to poorer mental and physical health, burnout, absenteeism, and reduced job performance among police personnel. Systematic reviews and empirical studies across settings show that both kinds of stressors impair officers' well-being and their ability to perform duties effectively.

1.3 Importance of the article

The Malawi Police Service (MPS) operates under resource constraints, ongoing reform pressures, and a public safety environment that places considerable demands on personnel. Understanding how workplace stress affects productivity in the MPS is important for policy makers, police leadership, union/SACCO bodies, and researchers seeking to improve service delivery, officer well-being, and retention.

This article synthesizes relevant literature, highlights Malawi-specific findings where available, analyses mechanisms linking stress to productivity, and proposes recommendations tailored to the MPS context.

1.4 Objectives of Research

1. To identify the main sources of workplace stress in the Malawi Police Service.
2. To analyze how stress affects employee productivity.
3. To synthesize evidence from Malawi and comparable settings.
4. To propose recommendations for reducing stress and enhancing productivity.

1.5 Scope of the discussion

This article draws on international policing literature and Malawi-specific case studies, acknowledging the limited quantitative data available in Malawi. It adopts a mixed-theoretical framework to analyze the causes and effects of workplace stress and suggests practical recommendations.

2.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

Research shows that police officers face both operational and organizational stressors that impact their well-being and productivity. Operational stressors include exposure to crime scenes, violence, and irregular work hours, while organizational stressors include poor leadership, lack of resources, and inadequate performance appraisal systems (Purba & Demou, 2019).

In Malawi, qualitative studies show that officers often face work overload and inadequate equipment, which undermines morale and performance (IJRPR, 2023). Malawi-specific research is more limited but indicative: case studies and institutional reviews of the MPS identify stressors such as workload pressure, inadequate supplies and protective equipment, dissatisfaction with performance appraisal systems, and economic pressures on officers (e.g., low pay prompting secondary work). These organizational deficiencies contribute to frustration, lower morale, and reduced effectiveness at station and community levels.

2.2 Definition and Sources of Workplace Stress

Workplace stress is defined as the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when job demands exceed an individual's capacity to cope (Leka & Cox, 2008). Common sources of workplace stress in law enforcement include high job demands, exposure to traumatic events, lack of support, and organizational constraints (Violanti et al., 2017).

2.2.1 Effects of Workplace Stress on Employee Productivity

Research indicates that workplace stress can lead to decreased productivity, increased absenteeism, and higher turnover rates (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In the context of the police service, stress can impair decision-making, reduce job performance, and negatively impact the quality of service provided to the community (Miller, 2013).

2.2.2 Coping Strategies and Organizational Support

Effective coping strategies and organizational support systems are essential in mitigating the effects of workplace stress. Programs that promote mental health awareness, provide counseling services, and foster a supportive work environment can enhance resilience among employees (Kahn & Byosiore, 1992).

2.3 Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by two main frameworks: the Job Demand Control Support (JDCS) Model and the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory. The JDCS Model posits that high job demands combined with low decision-making control and poor social support result in stress (Karasek, 1979). The COR Theory explains that stress arises when valued resources such as time, energy, and equipment are lost or threatened (Hobfoll, 1989). These frameworks are useful for analyzing stress in the context of the Malawi Police Service.

2.4 Discussion

2.4.1 Explanation of key concepts

Workplace stress refers to the psychological and physical strain resulting from work conditions that exceed an individual's coping capacity. In policing, stress directly affects employee productivity, which includes efficiency in case handling, response time, attendance, and decision-making quality (Queirós et al., 2020).

2.4.1.1 Current State of Workplace Stress in the Malawi Police Service

The MPS faces numerous challenges that contribute to workplace stress, including inadequate resources, high crime rates, and public scrutiny. Officers often work long hours under difficult conditions, which can lead to physical and mental exhaustion (Chikanda, 2016).

2.4.1.2 Key insights derived from the discussion

1. *Multifactorial causes:* Both operational exposures and organizational dysfunction contribute to officer stress in the MPS; organizational stressors (equipment shortages, appraisal dissatisfaction, and workload) are especially salient in Malawi case material.
2. *Clear productivity pathways:* Stress impairs cognition, motivation, and health each reducing individual and unit-level productivity. International literature supports these causal links; Malawi-specific qualitative evidence aligns with these mechanisms.

3. *Organizational change is essential:* Interventions targeted only at individual coping (e.g., stress management training) are unlikely to be sufficient if resource shortages and unfair organizational processes persist. Integrated organizational reforms paired with officer supports show the best promise.

2.5 Case studies

2.5.1 Lilongwe Model Police Station study (case study): qualitative findings from a Lilongwe station documented officers' reports of high work pressure and insufficient resources; respondents linked these conditions to poorer service delivery and low morale. While not nationally representative, the study highlights recurring themes across Malawi.

2.5.2 Institutional review findings: small-scale assessments of MPS systems (performance appraisal, SACCOs) indicate personnel dissatisfaction and financial strain for members, which may divert focus from core policing tasks and reduce productivity.

2.5.3 Data gap note: There is limited peer-reviewed, nationally representative quantitative data measuring stress prevalence among MPS officers or linking quantified stress scores to objective productivity metrics (e.g., case clearance, response times). The lack of standardized psychometric assessments for MPS officers is a critical gap.

2.6 Analysis with supporting evidence

Stress affects productivity through various pathways:

- Cognitive impairment: chronic stress reduces decision-making capacity (Violanti et al., 2017).
- Burnout: prolonged stress leads to emotional exhaustion and reduced motivation (Queirós et al., 2020).
- Health issues: stress increases absenteeism, reducing operational capacity (Anders et al., 2024).
- Maladaptive coping: officers may resort to substance abuse, undermining performance (Purba & Demou, 2019).

Table 1: Workplace Stressors and Their Effects on Productivity

STRESSORS	EFFECT ON PRODUCTIVITY
Operational stressors (trauma, danger, workload)	Fatigue, poor concentration, errors
Organizational stressors (resources, appraisal systems)	Demotivation, absenteeism, reduced performance
Economic stressors (low pay, financial pressure)	Reduced focus, increased turnover intention

3.1 Findings / Observations

Key findings suggest that organizational stressors are more significant in Malawi compared to operational ones. Officers report demotivation due to inadequate pay, poor appraisal systems, and lack of essential resources. These factors collectively reduce productivity and service delivery quality.

3.2 Summary of the main points

Workplace stress in policing is a well-established phenomenon that undermines employee productivity through cognitive, motivational, and health pathways. Malawi-specific studies, though limited in scale, indicate that organizational stressors insufficient resources, problematic appraisal systems, and economic pressures are prominent contributors to officer stress and are likely to reduce the MPS's effectiveness. To improve productivity and officer well-being, the MPS needs evidence-based, systemic interventions alongside individual-level supports.

3.3 Conclusion and Recommendations

Workplace stress in the Malawi Police Service is a major challenge, with organizational and economic stressors contributing significantly to reduced productivity.

Recommendations include

1. Improving resource allocation to stations
2. Revising performance appraisal systems
3. Providing counselling and peer-support programs
4. Conducting national-level surveys to generate empirical data

4.4 Practical recommendations for the Malawi Police Service

4.4.1 Short-to-medium term

1. *Conduct a baseline stress and productivity assessment,* implement a nationally representative survey using validated instruments (PSQ-Op/PSQ-Org, MBI) and link responses to objective productivity metrics (attendance, response times, and clearance rates).
2. *Improve resource allocation for high-impact needs,* prioritize essential equipment, transport, and station repairs that directly affect officers' ability to perform core duties. Even modest investments often yield outsized productivity gains.

3. *Revise performance appraisal and promotion processes*, ensure transparency, timely feedback, and participatory design to reduce perceptions of unfairness and demotivation.
4. *Establish peer support and confidential counselling*, implement low-cost peer-support networks and link to professional mental health services for critical-incident support.

4.4.2 Long term

5. *Integrate organizational reform with wellbeing strategies*, pair community policing and oversight reforms with training, resource provision, and change-management support to reduce transitional stress and build capacity.
6. *Institutionalize monitoring and evaluation*, create routine well-being and productivity dashboards to track trends and evaluate interventions.

4.5 Suggestions for future research

- National prevalence study of stress and burnout among MPS officers, disaggregated by rank, duty type, and region.
- Longitudinal designs linking stress measures to objective performance outcomes.
- Intervention trials (e.g., organizational change and counselling) measuring both wellbeing and productivity outcomes.

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