

BURNOUT SYNDROME AMONG CIVILIAN POLICE OFFICERS

A SÍNDROME DE BURNOUT ENTRE POLICIAIS CIVIS

EL SÍNDROME DE BURNOUT O DESGASTE PROFESIONAL EN LA POLICÍA CIVIL

Cleyton César Souto Silva ¹
Gracielle Malheiro dos Santos ²
Michelly dos Santos Amorim ³
Maria do Monte Herculano Costa ⁴
Soraya Maria de Medeiros ⁵

¹ Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte – UFRN, Departamento de Enfermagem, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Enfermagem na Atenção à Saúde. Natal, RN – Brazil.

² Universidade Federal de Campina Grande – UFCG, Núcleo de Estudos e Pesquisas em Epistemologia. Campina Grande, PB – Brazil.

³ Paraíba, Secretaria de Estado da Segurança e da Defesa Social do Estado da Paraíba, Gerência de Inteligência. João Pessoa, PB – Brazil.

⁴ Universidade Federal da Paraíba – UFPB, Departamento de Enfermagem em Saúde Pública e Psiquiatria. João Pessoa, PB – Brazil.

⁵ UFRN, Departamento de Enfermagem. Natal, RN – Brazil.

Corresponding author: Cleyton César Souto Silva. E-mail: csoutosilva@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To identify the occurrence of Burnout Syndrome among civilian police officers. **Methods:** A descriptive-quantitative study was carried out with all the civilian police officers who work in the Intelligence Department of the Secretariat of Security and Social Defense of the State of Paraíba/Brazil, including a total of 25 professionals. Data collection took place in August and September of 2011 through application of the Maslach Burnout Inventory and a questionnaire on socio-demographic and professional data. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the results. **Results:** The results obtained indicated the presence of Burnout traits but not the occurrence of the Syndrome in the group of civilian police officers investigated. They presented emotional exhaustion at the medium level 11 (44%), low level of depersonalization 15 (60%), and high level of reduced professional accomplishment 18 (72%). **Conclusion:** There is a need to implement preventive actions with civilian police officers such as the adoption of strategies aimed at guaranteeing their physical and emotional integrity.

Keywords: Burnout, Professional; Nursing; Occupational Health.

RESUMO

Objetivo: identificar a ocorrência da Síndrome de Burnout entre policiais civis. **Métodos:** estudo descritivo-quantitativo realizado com todos os policiais civis que atuam na Gerência de Inteligência da Secretaria de Estado da Segurança e da Defesa Social do estado da Paraíba/Brasil, no total de 25 profissionais. Na coleta de dados, em agosto e setembro de 2011, foram utilizados o Maslach Burnout Inventory e um questionário com dados sociodemográficos e profissionais. Para análise dos resultados utilizou-se estatística descritiva. **Resultados:** constataram-se traços de Burnout, mas não a ocorrência da síndrome, no grupo de policiais civis pesquisados, uma vez que detectaram-se exaustão emocional em nível médio em 11 (44%), despersonalização em nível baixo em 15 (60%) e reduzida realização profissional em nível alto em 18 (72%). **Conclusão:** há necessidade de implantação de ações de caráter preventivo entre os policiais civis como a adoção de estratégias que visem garantir a integridade física e emocional desses profissionais.

Palavras-chave: Esgotamento Profissional; Enfermagem; Saúde do Trabalhador.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Identificar el desgaste profesional en la policía civil. **Métodos:** estudio descriptivo y cuantitativo llevado a cabo con todos los agentes de policía que trabajan en la Dirección de Inteligencia de la Secretaría de Estado y de Defensa Social del estado de Paraíba / Brasil, en un total de 25 profesionales. Para la recogida de datos, en agosto y septiembre de 2011, se utilizó el Maslach Burnout Inventory y un cuestionario con datos sociodemográficos y profesionales. El análisis de datos se llevó a cabo según la estadística descriptiva. **Resultados:** Se constataron vestigios de agotamiento profesional, pero no del síndrome, entre grupo de agentes objeto de estudio, con nivel medio de cansancio emocional en 11 (44%) de ellos, bajo nivel de despersonalización en 15 (60%) y alto nivel de la sensación de poca realización profesional en 18 agentes (72%). **Conclusión:** Deberían implementarse acciones preventivas para la policía civil tales como la adopción de medidas para garantizar la integridad física y emocional de los profesionales.

Palabras clave: Agotamiento Profesional; Enfermería; Salud Ocupacional.

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INTRODUCTION

Complex and intense changes occur nowadays in the scope of work, requiring workers to become flexible and able to perform multiple tasks in their work process. This characteristic implies several occupational work-related hazards and can cause physical and mental health problems in workers.¹

In this context, the *Burnout Syndrome* (BS) has been recognized as a risk in professions involving healthcare, education and public safety due to the chronic emotional tension experienced by workers and the inherent emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and low personal accomplishment experienced.^{2,3}

Emotional burnout refers to the feeling of exhaustion of the emotional resources needed to deal with stressful situations. The loss of personal accomplishment at work arises from dissatisfaction with achievements and decline in the sense of competence and social interaction. In turn, depersonalization represents negative attitudes, insensitivity and lack of concern, leading the professional to treat patients, workmates and the organization in a dehumanized manner.⁴

The negative impact of the BS is associated lower satisfaction, loss of empathy, a decrease in productivity, an increase in the rate of absenteeism and professional dropout. BS can, moreover, condition socio-familial negative effects, substance abuse, depression or even suicidal ideation.⁵

Several factors contribute to the development of the syndrome. These include characteristics such as type of occupation, time of professional practice, time in the institution, work shift, overload, relationship between professional and client, types of clients, relationships among workmates, job dissatisfaction, lack of responsibility, lack of progression at work, and conflict with personal values.⁶

Scientific evidence indicates that the characteristics of the work and the working conditions of police officers expose them to physical and mental risks and distress. Their work activities involve multiple tensions, institutional demands, emotional management, maintenance of order and zeal for the law, and harmony with society. Besides, they are under a greater risk of death and a tendency to develop stress due to internal relations of the corporation, the workload and the nature of the activities they carry out. This points to a susceptibility of this professional category to BS and the need to investigate this disorder in these workers.^{6,7}

The need to increase the knowledge about *burnout* in the work environment of civilian police employees becomes evident to the extent that these workers are likely to develop BS. Furthermore, the importance of creating policies aimed at promoting the health preventing diseases among police workers emphasizes the need for information about the occupational health and specifically about the detection of disease in this population.⁸

Nursing has the potential to contribute critically to this matter by playing its role in promoting health in various work

spaces. Its role in the work process of police officers is to suggest ways to reduce or prevent *burnout* by means of active coping strategies, interventional or preventive measures such as permanent education activities, better use of work process technologies, improvement of work environment conditions, management of work processes and research of other work realities to make work less exhausting.³

Thus, the objective of the present study was to identify the *Burnout Syndrome* among civilian police officers. The reference that guided the study was the concept of occupational stress and its relation with the appearance of mental disorders.

METHODS

This is an exploratory-descriptive study carried out at the Gerência de Inteligência (GINTEL) of the Secretaria de Estado da Segurança e da Defesa Social (SEDS) in the city of João Pessoa – Paraíba, Northeast Brazil.

The activities of this department are a response and support to the fight against violence in general and, especially, against highly complex crimes, trying to identify, understand and reveal the hidden aspects of criminal activity that would be difficult to detect by traditional means of police investigation. It also serves to assist government authorities on the preparation of public security plans and policies. The institution is made up of civilian police officers and also has a investigative agent with graduate training in Nursing.

Civilian police officers (CPO) represent the first link in the production of criminal justice and their main activity is to investigate and denounce crimes, basically acting after their occurrence. CPO are specifically responsible for the investigation of crimes and their authorship, preparation of bulletins of any kind, issuance of identity cards and of certificates of criminal records and residence, issuance of firearm licences, and issuance of permits of controlled products, among others.⁹

It is also the responsibility of CPO to supervise the operation of certain commercial activities and to authorize the holding of major events. CPO have diverse careers such as head of police stations, police clerks, police investigators, criminal experts, medical examiners, fingerprint specialists, and scientific police officers.⁹

The sample of the study was made up of 25 civilian police officers linked to the GINTEL. There was no sample loss and all the police officers of the institution met the established selection criteria, namely: being linked to the abovementioned institution and in service for at least one year. After clarification, all members of the group agreed to participate in the research and signed the informed consent form.

Data collection occurred in the months of August and September of 2011. Two instruments were used; a questionnaire on sociodemographic and professional information and

the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI).⁵ In addition to demographic characteristics, the questionnaire investigated occupational data related to the type of work and working conditions, health situation and job satisfaction.

The MBI was created by Susan Jackson and Cristina Maslach and investigates the personal feelings and attitudes professionals who provide assistance, such as police officers and nurses, in their work environment, and enables the epidemiological study to detect *burnout* within the framework of the relationships between professional providers of services and care and their recipients.⁵

The original autoinformative instrument consists of 22 items in a Likert-type scale with answers ranging from 1 to 6. The score varies from zero, indicating that statement in the item "never happens", and proceeds gradually up to six, which indicates that it happens every day. The instrument evaluates the three BS dimensions: emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DE) and reduced professional accomplishment (PA).⁵

The main variables belong to the categories of the instrument used, in the case of the EE dimension, these are feelings of emotional overload, loss of energy, exhaustion and constant fatigue that affect the individual physically and/or psychically, even reducing their productivity capacity. DE involves loss of motivation, anxiety and increased irritability, social detachment/isolation, dehumanized attitudes, cynicism and rigidity in social relations. And finally, PA appears with signs of personal and professional inadequacy to work, negative attitudes towards oneself and towards work such as depression, reduced interpersonal relationships, low self-esteem, low productivity and feelings of incompetence. In order to preserve the identity and to respect the ethical principles pertaining to the respondents, letters and numbers were assigned to their questionnaires.¹

The scores of the three subscales are analyzed separately and are not combined into a single total score. Thus, a person with high scores in the EE and DE subscales and low scores in the PA subscale is considered to present *Burnout Syndrome*. Mean scores on the three subscales reflect the degree of *burnout*. High scores on the PA subscale and low on the subscales EE and DE indicate low degree of *burnout*.¹

Data collection was done by the researchers themselves, through application of a questionnaire and of the MBI, which were delivered to the participants of the research at the beginning of the work shift and were collected at the end of the study with the permission of the manager of GINTEL.

Data collected in the sociodemographic and professional questionnaire and in the MBI were stored in a database and analyzed by means of descriptive statistics, using a free *software* for statistical analyses.

The research project was approved by the Comitê de Ética of the Centro de Ciências da Saúde of the Universidade

Federal da Paraíba (CAE: 0205/11) of the Universidade Federal do Paraíba (CAE: 0205/11) and its execution and data analysis respected the ethical determinations of Resolution nº 196/96, in force at the time, and Resolution nº 466/12 of the Conselho Nacional de Saúde (BR).

RESULTS

SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC AND OCCUPATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

The study consisted of 25 civilian police officers, of which 19 were male (76%) and six were female (19%). These findings are compatible with the gender distribution in this type of occupation, where the number of men is traditionally higher than that of women.

The predominant age group of the study participants was 20 to 30 years (44%), thus representing a group of mostly young professionals. As for schooling, the data showed that the great part of these professionals had complete superior education (68%). As for the marital status, the majority was married (56%) and had one (24%) or two (24%) children. Regarding the housing condition, the majority of these professionals had their own house.

Table 1 shows that most of the professionals in the GINTEL had the position of investigative agents, although they performed some type of function related to the police intelligence activity. Regarding time of professional practice, most police officers had a maximum of 10 years of practice, received up to five minimum wages, and had work loads of up to 40 hours per week, as legally established by law, although a significant part stated that they work between 40 and 60 hours per week.

With regard to extraordinary overtime work, most professionals claimed to do it as a way to supplement their income. Many of these workers spent 84 hours or more monthly on these extraordinary activities and claimed to receive some kind of benefit when they needed to extend their workload because of the demand in the service; a few receive this benefit in the form of time off and many in the form of money. A representative number of participants claimed to receive nothing when their workload needs to be extended (Table 1).

In Table 2, regarding the issue of autonomy and decision-making power, most professionals did not have them. As for planning of activities, a large part of the participants said to plan activities, and all claimed to develop activities that require attention. As for activities offered by the institution to improve the health of the workers, all indicated that such activities are not offered by GINTEL, although the majority said to carry out a tiring job and be required to do more than the needed in the institution.

Table 1 - Distribution of professionals of the Intelligence Department according to occupational variables. João Pessoa, 2011

Occupational characteristics	N	%
Position		
Investigative agent	17	68
Police clerk	8	32
Time of profession		
Up to 10 years	19	76
10.01 to 20 years	5	20
More than 20 years	1	4
Workload		
Up to 40 hours	17	68
40 to 60 hours	7	28
More than 60 hours	1	4
Overtime work to supplement income		
Yes	22	88
No	3	12
How many extra hours (in case of overtime work)		
Up to 48 hours	4	16
48.01 to 83	4	16
84 or more	14	56
Extra benefit (when it is necessary to extend the workload)		
Yes	19	76
No	6	24
Form of benefit		
Day off	2	8
Money	17	68

Source: Research data (2011).

Table 2 - Distribution of professionals of the Intelligence Department according to characteristics of the work process. João Pessoa, 2011

Characteristics of the Work Process	N	%
Autonomy (decision-making power)		
Yes	9	36
No	16	64
Planning of activities		
Yes	17	68
No	8	32
Activity requires attention		
Yes	25	100
No	0	0
Activities for improvement of health		
Yes	0	0
No	25	100
Tiring work		
Yes	21	84
No	4	16

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Table 2 - Distribution of professionals of the Intelligence Department according to characteristics of the work process. João Pessoa, 2011

Characteristics of the Work Process	N	%
Involvement with work		
Beyond what is required	13	52
What is required	11	44
Less than required	1	4
Demands		
Internal	5	20
External	3	12
Both	15	60
None	2	8
Recognition of work		
Yes	4	16
No	21	84
Job satisfaction		
Yes	24	96
No	1	4

Source: Research data (2011).

A great number of participants claimed to receive internal demands (immediate manager and executive manager) and external demands (heads of police stations, secretary of security, governor of the state). The vast majority said that they did not have recognition on the part of the institution regarding the activities carried out by them. Despite of it, the majority said they were satisfied with the work they do (Table 2).

BURNOUT SYNDROME

According to the literature, a high level of *burnout* is indicated by high scores in emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and low scores in reduced professional accomplishment. This study revealed that 11 respondents presented an average of 44% of emotional exhaustion, but caution should be taken with this frequency, since it is very close to high EE (10 subjects; 40%). The frequency in DE was low (15 subjects, 60%), and the mean DE index (nine subjects, 36%) stood out in the same dimension. Regarding PA, the index was high (18 subjects; 72%).

These results reveal that there was no occurrence of BS among GINTEL civilian police officers because most of the participants in the study presented a medium level of emotional exhaustion, low level depersonalization and high level professional accomplishment.

The frequency of responses to the questions of each dimension of *burnout was evaluated*. According to Table 3, the EE dimension revealed that most respondents felt extremely tired every day at the end of each journey and when they

wake up in the morning and have to face another working day, they feel exhausted.

Table 3 - Assessment of flevel of emotional exhaustion (EE) in civilian police officers. João Pessoa, 2011

Variables	Low		Medium		High	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Emotional exhaustion	4	16	14	56	7	28
Tiredness in the workday	1	4	8	32	16	64
Tiredness in the morning	3	12	13	52	9	36
Great effort at work	13	52	6	24	6	24
Exhaustion at work	4	16	7	28	14	56
Frustration at work	11	44	8	32	6	24
Excess of work	7	28	10	40	8	32
At the limit of the strength	12	48	8	32	5	20

Source: Research data (2011).

It is important to note that most police officers say that working with people all day long rarely requires much effort. They also say that they rarely feel frustrated at work once a year or less, and a lower number feel the same frustration a few times a week, not yet at the limit of strength.

Finally, they confess, on average, that they feel emotionally exhausted because of their work and are working too much at least once a month. This dimension shows characteristics of workers who are tired to the extreme and with the sensation of not having the energy to face a new day of work.

Table 4 shows the responses of the DE dimension. In this dimension, it is emphasized that police officers rarely treat people as impersonal objects; they blamed themselves for their problems just a few times, once a year or less. On average, there was real concern about what appened to the people they assist. However, there was a considerable concern with the fact that work has made them less emotionally sensitive. In short, this result did not reveal the adoption of insensitive or hostile attitudes towards people who receive the service/care.

Table 4 - Evaluation of the frequency of level of depersonalization (DE) in civilian police officers. João Pessoa, 2011

Variables	Low		Medium		High	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
The professional treats people as objects	19	76	5	20	1	4
The professional shows emotional hardening	11	44	6	24	8	32
The professional does not care about people	18	72	7	28	0	0
The professional blames himself/herself for people's problems	19	76	3	12	3	12

Source: Research data (2011).

The results of the professional accomplishment dimension are shown in Table 5. The data show a high index to easily un-

derstand what people feel when they seek help from a civilian police officer who in turn feels they can positively influence people's lives every day. They say to feel vitality and efficiency when solving people's problems everyday.

Table 5 - Assessment of the level of professional accomplishment (PA) in civilian police officers. João Pessoa, 2011

Variables	Low		Medium		High	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Ease to feel people	1		7		17	
Efficiency in solving people's problems	2		10		13	
Positive influence on people	0		9		16	
Vitality	2		10		13	
Encouraged to contact people	1		13		11	
The professional handles emotional problems at work	3		13		9	

Source: Research data (2011).

On average, the respondents said they felt encouraged after working in contact with people a few times a week. Finally, they confessed that sometimes a month they feel that they know how to deal adequately with emotional problems at work. This dimension can reveal feelings of incompetence and personal and professional frustration when present in the workers.

DISCUSSION

There is a high incidence of *burnout* among workers who provide assistance to the public. Thus, it is important not to confuse normal stress with *burnout*. In the BS, work-related behavioral symptoms predominate in people who did not suffer from some psychic disorder, to the detriment of physical symptoms, such as mental exhaustion, depression, decreased affection, fatigue and negative attitudes.¹⁰

However, the fact that some interviewees presented medium level and others high level in the EE dimension, besides nine who presented medium level in the DE dimension, indicates the existence of signs of occupational stress, although *burnout* is not installed yet. Similarly, a survey found that police officers had ongoing BS with a high EE level followed by physical and psychic symptoms.⁶

Thus, occupational stress and the medium score of EE identified in this study may be related to the tiring work, the internal and external demands, lack of autonomy and decision-making power and lack of recognition reported by the research subjects. Generally, stressors in police work are classified as: stressors inherent in police work; stressors linked to internal police department practices and policies; stressors stemming from tensions with the criminal justice system and society in general; and internal stressors of the police officer.⁹

Aspects related to the organization of police work are responsible for the perception of a greater workload such as working in hazardous and unhealthy environments. Pressures and demands of the work itself, in addition to administrative and organizational demands, negatively affect the health and lifestyle of these professionals, generating psychic stress and suffering.⁶

The work of police officers as law enforcers and repressors against criminality requires constant alertness to act in the midst of urban violence. Therefore, the danger and fear of being recognized as a police officer on a day-off basis tends to isolate the professional from other social segments, bringing anxiety, physical and emotional exhaustion, and stimulating impulsive self-defense behaviors that generate damages to health and quality of life.⁹

The medium and high scores in the EE dimension may be related to overtime at work, since a good part of the respondents said to perform extraordinary overtime activities as a way to supplement their income. Among these, more than half work 84 extra hours or more per month. Moreover, all civilian police officers surveyed claimed not to receive any offer from the institution regarding any type of activity aimed at improving their health, although most of them claimed to develop a tiring job.

According to research carried out on the perception of police workers about their profession, it is not the work itself that makes them sick, but the way the work is organized and the conditions for its realization. The incidence of medium EE scores can not be disregarded as a disease process because this dimension may be relevant for depersonalization and decreased personal accomplishment.⁸

Low and medium indices in the DE dimension may be associated with considerable values for emotional hardening and lack of concern with people. They may also be related to occupational data such as demands, lack of autonomy and non-recognition on the part of the institution.

Emotional hardening may stem from the need to express and suppress diverse emotions, as being sympathetic and welcoming with the victims or being hostile and inquiring with the accused ones. This requirement of emotional control by police officers to exhibit positive and negative emotions arising from interactions with various social actors in a work context marked by tensions, pressures and demands may be related to *burnout*.⁷

Civilian police officers may have high expectations or unfulfilled expectations regarding work challenges, rewards, recognition, career progression, and other work-related stressful aspects that may generate BS. Expectations about the profession, the organization and the own personal effectiveness can significantly contribute to *burnout*.⁹

The high score found in PA can be related to the medium and high frequencies of the following variables: feeling that the work developed positively influences the lives of people, every day; ease to feel people; vitality and efficiency in solving peo-

ple's problems. The fact that the institution offers good working conditions may have also contributed to the high rate of professional accomplishment among respondents, whose majority claimed to feel satisfaction with the work they do.

In a survey of the perception of police officers about their work, the interviewees experienced disappointment, lack of support and devaluation. To do work activities because they are necessary would be an attitude adopted by some police workers that indicated that there is no longer fulfillment with the realization of work and the action is restricted to fulfilling obligations. Autonomy, however, was related to confidence, freedom and privacy among members as a protective factor against the development of BS.⁸

It was noticed in this study that the police workers do not have professional recognition. They felt a lack of acknowledgment of their professional identity as workers of a collective institution, although hierarchical. Satisfaction reflects the image of hero projected by police workers themselves in the community and reflects the biased image which is against the view of police work built by the media. The idealization of the profession and its choice by the vast majority of police officers are based on the idea of contributing to a better world and the commitment to do something in favor of society as an ideal of life.⁸

Illnesses among police workers deserve a closer attention from nursing, taking into consideration that the health-work-sickness process is complex and results in a significant economic and social impact. Thus, early identification of stressful situations and forms of coping with attrition in the work process can contribute to minimize the risk of illness and *burnout*.⁶

CONCLUSION

In this study, police officers did not present *burnout*. However, it is necessary to call attention to the risk of developing the syndrome, due to the observed results of emotional exhaustion and the medium scores of depersonalization found. Therefore, it can be said that these individuals experience distress in the development of their work activities with different intensities and perceptions.

The contributions of nursing in this context of work are in line with the attributions of the nursing professionals as educators who uses health education and/or nursing consultations as strategies to preserve health, due to the occupational risks to which police professionals are exposed. Among these measures, we can highlight actions/behaviors to cope with stress as well as emotional and social support.

Nurses have, therefore, the role of developing preventive actions among civilian police workers of the institution studied with the goal to promote the physical and emotional integrity of these professionals. Such actions can improve the quality of life of these workers in their work environment and, conse-

quently, reduce or eliminate the traits of *burnout* present in the group researched.

In broadening the reflection, it is evident that both the government and the institutions themselves do not give due value to police work, since there are few investments in working conditions, low wages and lack of worker health programs for this category. Only recently has the Public Security and Commission for Combat of Organized Crime of the country's Chamber of Deputies approved the draft Law 5,492/2016, which guarantees members of the public security system throughout Brazil additional attention due to the risk of the organic and psychosomatic wear suffered to ensure public order and the safety of people.

The limitation of this research is the fact that the instrument used describes a specific moment of the interviewees, which can change in the face of their daily activities.

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