

## OCCUPATIONAL BURNOUT AS A NEGATIVE PHENOMENON IN POLISH UNIFORMED SERVICES — RESEARCH REPORT

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**Abstract:** Occupational burnout is an increasingly common disorder occurring in various occupational groups, especially in uniformed services. The research was conducted among police officers. The research process involved 140 policemen selected using the snowball sampling method. The results obtained confirmed that the vast majority (80%) suffer from medium and high levels of occupational burnout. The highest level of burnout is observed in long-serving males working in the prevention department. Research results show that there is an urgent need to, first and foremost, design measures to prevent the process of occupational burnout from developing in this group of employees. These activities should mainly focus on preventive and therapeutic programmes aimed at both minimising the risk factors and reducing the excessive work-related mental strain.

**Keywords:** occupational burnout, stress, police, uniformed services.

### 1. Introduction

Occupational burnout is an increasingly common phenomenon occurring in various occupational groups. Unfortunately, this problem remains insufficiently described in the subject literature in Poland. However, conversations, research and prevention of occupational burnout are of utmost importance.

Uniformed services belonging to high-risk groups constitute administratively and socially difficult material for this type of research. The persisting opinion is that people struggling with mental problems are afraid to speak out on the matter. The consequence is the lack of activities related to the elimination of this negative phenomenon. Therefore, this study is extremely important in the aspect of "breaking" the silence around this problem, especially in this

professional group. The research conducted confirmed that the vast majority of the uniformed services suffer from a medium and high degree of burnout. This group includes both women and men working in the Prevention Department and the Minor Offences Department.

This paper is devoted to the issue of occupational burnout in a distinctive uniformed organisation, namely the police. The nature of the profession carried out by police officers implies that this group is particularly vulnerable to occupational burnout. This problem is a commonly discussed topic in the world, in places where the comfort and hygiene of the uniformed services are protected. Unfortunately, this subject is often treated as "taboo" in Poland, and complicated administrative processes make it difficult to carry out long-term research in a seamless fashion. This direction of research development can be considered significant, especially in relation to human capital management. The modern approach to work has forced researchers to explore this phenomenon in order to achieve better employee performance by minimising their discomfort in the workplace.

**The main research problem** was to obtain answers to the following questions:

1. To what extent does the phenomenon of occupational burnout occur among police officers?
2. Is there a difference in the level of occupational burnout between women and men?
3. Is there a difference in the level of occupational burnout between police officers working in the Minor Offences Department and those working in the Prevention Department?

## 2. Methodology and scope of the study

The study was conducted in the form of an online survey. Respondents were selected using the **snowball sampling method**; each officer shared a link to the study with another officer. This method involved purposive sampling, i.e. the first questionnaires were sent to persons known to the researcher as the target of the survey and, in turn, these persons forwarded further questionnaires following instructions contained in the key. The questionnaire which was used for the examination of occupational burnout was the Occupational Burnout Test available at the Psychological Test Laboratory (Polish: Pracownia Testów Psychologicznych).

The analysis of the collected data was carried out using **cross-analysis**, i.e. statistical description of the frequency of responses (sums of results), taking into account more than one dependent and independent variable. 147 persons participated in the study. Due to the failure to return a fully-completed questionnaire, 140 questionnaires were included in the analysis. The subjects were aged between 26 and 50. Respondents indicated where they worked, whether in the Prevention Department or in the Offences Department (who performed office work). The study involved 28 women and 112 men. It was carried out at the end of 2018. The subjects

were informed about their voluntary participation in the study and about the anonymity of the data, and that the collected research material will be used for scientific purposes only.

### 3. From stress to occupational burnout

Police officers are a high-risk group, at risk of occupational burnout due to their unique work environment, in which there is a high probability of potential life injuries affecting their physical and emotional well-being. They operate in a unique work environment where potentially traumatic events affecting their physical and mental well-being may occur. The job of a police officer is therefore perceived as stressful and demanding. This is due to potentially aggressive and dangerous situations to which officers are exposed.

Stress is a state that accompanies people inseparably throughout their life in each of its spheres. Undoubtedly, one such sphere is the workplace. Professional activity is a social requirement, as well as a personal aspiration and a tool to ensure a person's survival. In addition, assuming that people of working age spend at least one third of their time at work, it is inevitable that this is also an area affected by the aforementioned stress. Occupational burnout can be considered on the basis of the social stress theory, which assumes that difficulties in adaptation or differences in values can affect the occurrence of stress (Łosiak, 2008).

Moreover, satisfying internal needs through work carries a certain emotional charge. These are often positive emotions, resulting from satisfying material and personal needs. However, it also provides a sense of security, stability and inclusion in a group. It is therefore no surprise that work occupies a significant place in research on values in human life (Kraczla, 2015). According to the CBOS (Centre for Public Opinion Research) study (2011), 92% of respondents agree that diligence is a necessary condition for success in life (Boguszewski, 2011, p. 54). However, such high value of work in human life can also be destructive, becoming a source of emotional stress and a cause of both somatic and mental illnesses. Some occupations are particularly destructive to physical health, while others have a negative impact on its social and psychological sphere. In almost every working environment, a person has to *encounter stress factors causing tension and strong emotions, leading to diminished performance and effectiveness of the functioning of the individual, and in many cases even to health disorders* (Kraczla, 2015, p. 68).

Chronic exposure to stress stimuli at work leads to the consolidation of stress symptoms and, as a consequence, to occupational burnout. Research on the phenomenon of occupational burnout has a 20-year-long tradition. The approach to occupational burnout itself has undergone advanced evolution, not only in terms of research, but also in social terms. This topic used to be considered shameful or even forbidden. Some, on the other hand, denied the very existence

of such a phenomenon. Undoubtedly, it made research work more difficult, but it was also a source of information on human behavioural mechanisms.

Every issue affecting the human psyche brings with it the difficulty of unambiguous definition. It is no different in the case of occupational burnout. There are two models for explaining what occupational burnout is:

1. Multidimensional model of burnout.

This model defines burnout as *a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced sense of personal achievement that can occur in individuals working with other people in a certain manner* (Pasikowski, 2000, pp. 135-149). The aforementioned emotional strain refers to a feeling in which the person is too emotionally taxed and his/her resources in this respect have already been exhausted to a large extent. On the other hand, depersonalisation refers to indifference and lack of response towards other people. A diminished sense of personal achievement translates into a reduced sense of empowerment, competence or self-esteem.

2. One-dimensional model of burnout.

This model is derived from the nomothetic approach to the occurrence of occupational burnout and determines whether there are factors pointing towards this process or not. The occurrence of this negative phenomenon is determined on the basis of short measurements which provide an unambiguous answer. Without a doubt, this is a less-complicated approach than a multidimensional model and yields a result that is easier to achieve. That is why so many researches build their theories on the basis of this trend (Sęk, 2000; Selye, 1978; Maslach, Leiter, 2011).

Thus, occupational burnout is a process of loss and disappointment that characterises people with high motivation to act. The occurrence of the *burnout* process indicates the failure of a person in striving for professional and life success.

It follows that people with low motivation to act will be less likely to burn out due to their low level of involvement in work and relationships within the organisation (Makowski et al., 2014. p. 15; Grant, 2004).

#### **4. Police in Poland — character of the profession**

Regardless of its specificity, uniformed service always constitutes a risk group exposed to occupational burnout. Undoubtedly, all the units of the uniformed services have an exceptionally specific working environment, both internally (as a structure of work) and externally (people they work with and meet during their service). All events that are categorised as difficult or traumatic affect their psychological and physical performance.

Research shows that the process of occupational burnout may result from endogenous factors, i.e. gender, age or personality components.

On the other hand, exogenous sources of occupational stress in police officers include:

- specific work environment, related to the use of force, violent and unpredictable situations,
- lack of appropriate networks of trust and support in the professional group,
- the bureaucratic nature in which police work is organised; this stems from the fact that the police are part of semi-military uniformed services with a low level of individuality,
- hierarchical and military structure of the organization, frequent lack of adequate resource management and the absence of intra-organisational support culture,
- the impact of the professional sphere on the private (family) life of an officer (Ortega, Brenner, Leather, 2018).

Police stressors are usually divided into three categories (Burke, Mikkelsen, 2006, pp. 64-83):

- personal,
- occupational,
- organisational.

Studies show that there are significant relationships between stressors in the workplace and negative impacts on health. Moreover, it turns out that organisational stressors are the most frequent and have the strongest connection with the loss of mental well-being (Maslach, Leiter, 2011).

Occupational burnout in police officers is usually viewed as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, cynicism and reduced effectiveness. It refers to a process in which the attitude and behaviour of an individual undergo a negative change as a result of work-related stressors. A process of gradual disappointment takes place, consisting in the loss of energy, idealism and enthusiasm for work.

There are two dimensions to the occupational burnout of police officers (Bakker, Heuven, 2006, p. 423-440):

1. emotional expansion,
2. depersonalisation.

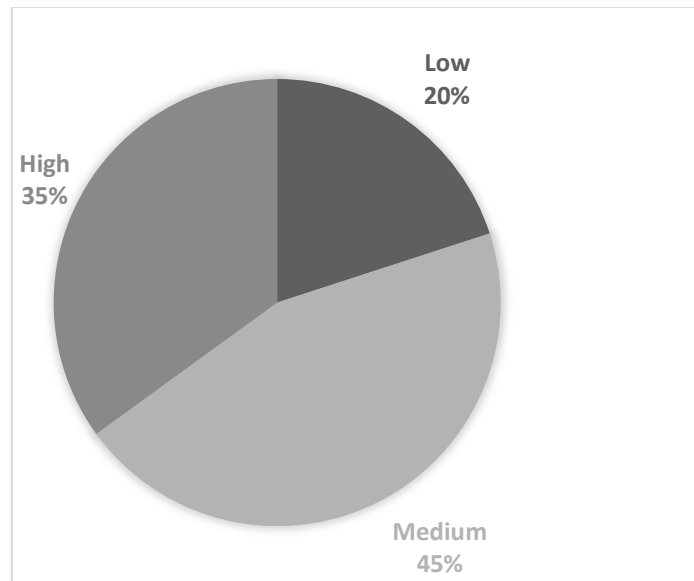
Chronic emotional strain accompanying police officers in interactions with people may give them a feeling of excessive emotional exhaustion, relationship breakdowns, and distance. Methods of dealing with this kind of exhaustion are based on limiting one's involvement in relations with the recipients, resulting in distancing oneself from them.

The decrease in the level of engagement in relations is expressed through cynicism and depersonalisation towards the recipients and a decrease in empathy. This can lead to the negative phenomenon of blaming the victim of an incident. A common example is blaming raped women for the incident (Bakker, Heuven, 2006, p. 423-440).

## 5. Results of own research

On the basis of the conducted research, it was found that in the group of 140 people 20% were women, and 80% were men. There are more men working in the police force than women. Moreover, the method for selecting respondents (snowball sampling) disqualified the possibility of proportional sampling.

Figure 1 presents the results of the analysis of descriptive statistics concerning the level of occupational burnout in the examined group.



**Figure 1.** Level of occupational burnout among police officers. Source: own study.

The conducted research shows that the vast majority of respondents declare a medium (35%) or high (45%) degree of occupational burnout. Only 25% of respondents reported a low degree of occupational burnout.

**A low level** of occupational burnout means that the tasks performed at work are commensurate with their capabilities. The system for dealing with problems at work is correct. Such a result indicates that the person likes and enjoys his or her job; moreover, he or she has the appropriate level of energy to carry out his or her occupational duties.

This result also indicates the subjective feelings of a person. He or she is a competent individual who carries out the entrusted tasks well. He or she is perceived as an effective and optimistic person. He or she is viewed by peers as confident and efficient in communicating with the group. This person is comfortable with the professional group, but also has a positive attitude towards the society—exhibits an empathetic attitude, which helps in relations with the staff.

**A medium level** of occupational burnout indicates that the working person is balancing on the edge of his or her abilities. He or she is not necessarily good at dealing with professional problems. Long-term work in this fashion predisposes an individual to the occurrence of

symptoms of occupational burnout. This can result in a sense of physical, mental and emotional exhaustion. Such a result should be a warning that the person is at risk.

People with this result often feel tired and irritated, but still have the ability to regenerate. The symptoms usually disappear after a short rest in the form of a holiday.

Subjectively, this result indicates that the person perceives himself/herself as professionally resourceful, but to a limited extent. Despite feeling work fatigue, these people are able to achieve good results. While feeling stressed, they become motivated and achieve harmony. In interpersonal relations, these individuals exhibit a subjective attitude, but they feel an internal overload with contacts, resulting in a desire to take a break from people. Despite having a sense of identity with their colleagues and willingness to solve their problems, they balance on the edge of their abilities.

**A high level** of occupational burnout means that the duties they perform exceed their ability to cope with stress at work. The result is a feeling of physical, mental and emotional exhaustion.

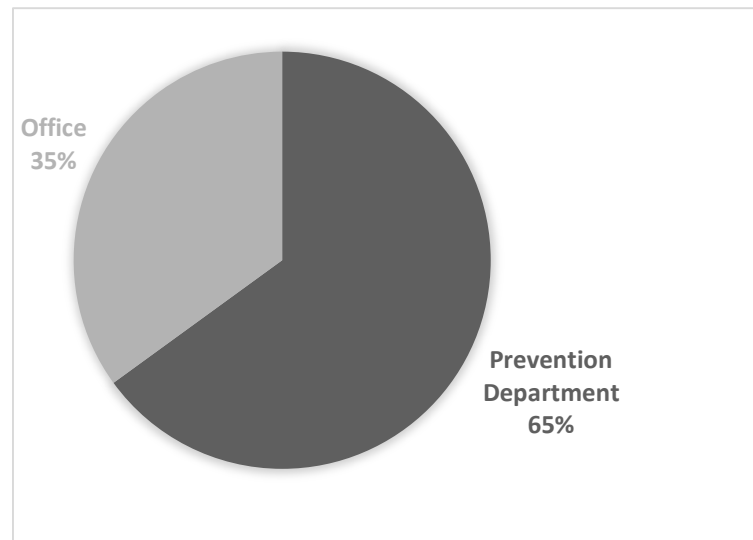
Such a person loses faith in his/her abilities, both in professional and social relations. Symptoms of a high level of occupational burnout are a general feeling of tiredness, the lack of energy and of willingness to perform any professional activities. They also lead to more serious consequences, beyond the professional sphere, such as decline in joy of life, irritability and impulsive behaviour. They correlate with depressive symptoms, such as sleep disorders, headaches or other psychosomatic issues.

Subjectively, they assess themselves as inefficient, unable to cope with problems at work, deprived of control over their duties. This results in the avoidance of professional obligations and failure to perform the duties entrusted. In interpersonal relationships, these persons treat others like objects, lack empathy and gradually withdraw from social interactions.

As a result of the conducted research, it appears that the main factors of the professional burnout process are:

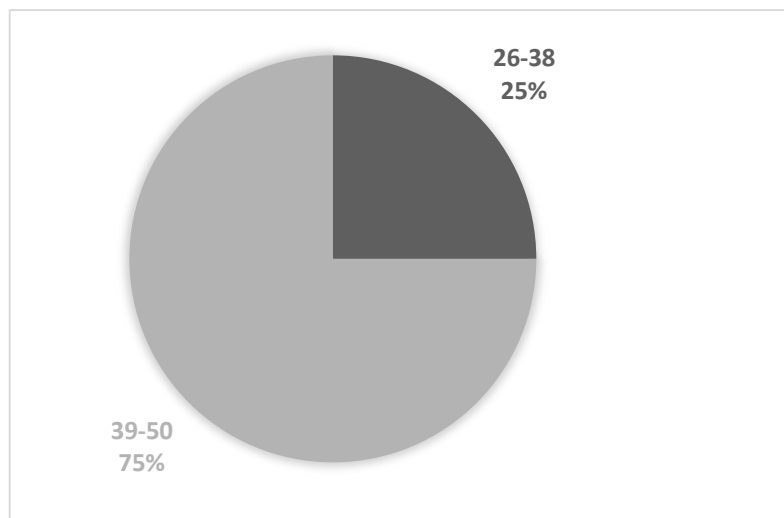
1. excessive workload, i.e. a situation in which the expectations exceed the performance capabilities of the individual,
2. lack of adequate compensation for work, strictly related to the level of salary received, or, in fact, the imbalance between the workload and the level of material remuneration; moreover, this is also associated with the lack of internal satisfaction from the work performed (Bakker, Heuven, 2006, p. 423-440).

Figure 2 shows the distribution of respondents according to their service department. It indicates that the vast majority of respondents serve in the Prevention Department.



**Figure 2.** Distribution of respondents according to departments in which they are employed. Source: own study.

This result is determined by the nature of the work of given police officers. Persons working in the Minor Offences Department (35% in the office) had higher chances to take part in the survey than those working in the field (65%), if only due to the availability of tools such as computers and the Internet.



**Figure 3.** High level of occupational burnout in relation to age. Source: own study.

A high and medium level of occupational burnout can be observed in the 39-50 age range (75% of respondents), while people aged 26-38 (25% of respondents) exhibit a low level of professional burnout.

### Cross-analysis

Table 1 presents the results of the level of occupational burnout in relation to serving in a particular department.



**Table 1.**

*Number of persons declaring the degree of professional burnout in the Prevention and Petty Offences Departments*

	<b>Prevention Dept.</b>	<b>Minor Offences Dept.</b>
Low	14	14
Medium	42	14
High	35	21

Source: own elaboration.

According to the study, police officers in the prevention force are characterised by a much higher level of occupational burnout. The results indicate a medium and high degree of occupational burnout (77 persons). This constitutes over 84% of the surveyed population employed in this Department. It should be noted, however, that occupational burnout is a common and frequent phenomenon among the surveyed group, regardless of the nature of their work. This is indicated by the fact that the majority of results are characteristic of the medium and high degree of occupational burnout (80% of the whole research group).

**Table 2.**

*Differences in occupational burnout rates by gender*

	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>
Low	8	20
Medium	13	48
High	7	44

Source: own elaboration.

Despite the lack of proportionality within the group, it can be stated that 75% of the examined female group show a medium and high degree of occupational burnout, while in the male group a medium or high degree of occupational burnout is declared by 94% of the examined group (Henszen-Niejodek, 2011).

The lower level of occupational burnout among women can be explained by general personality theories. Women have much more effective techniques for dealing with emotions and difficulties. They also show greater emotional intelligence and empathy.

## **6. Summary and conclusions**

Occupational burnout is a common disorder in high-risk occupations. The study indicates that this theory has been confirmed. However, before the research results are summarised, it is important to note certain errors in the study that could not be avoided. The sample was selected using the snowball sampling method, which means that it is not possible to extrapolate these results. The gender proportionality of the surveyed group also does not allow the results to be imposed onto larger populations. However, this study may undoubtedly contribute to the deepening of the analysis concerning such a peculiar professional group as police officers.

Without a doubt, exploration of this issue is extremely important for this professional group, even in the broader context of all uniformed services.

1. The presented research results leave no doubt that there is a medium and high degree of burnout in the professional group of police officers. According to the study, over 45% of the group declares a medium level of occupational burnout, and as many as 35% of the entire group declare a high level of occupational burnout. This is an extremely worrying result as the vast majority of the group shows even slightest signs of burnout. Failure to counteract such disorders may find its reflection in improper performance of the duties entrusted.
2. Despite the lack of proportionality of the group, it can be said that men fall victim to burnout more often than women. As mentioned above, this may result from general personality theories that attribute a better ability to cope with stressful situations to women than to men.

There are significant differences in the level of burnout between the group serving in the Prevention Department and the group serving in the Minor Offences Department (office work).

People working in Prevention exhibit a higher level of burnout. The reason behind this fact may be that these persons work in the field. They are directly confronted with the most difficult situations, which they have to resolve. Their empathy, sense of control and empowerment can diminish through difficult interventions. Undoubtedly, the situation in this professional group is a sensitive issue. However, this phenomenon should not be treated as a taboo; instead, constructive conclusions should be drawn in this regard.

Research results show that there is an urgent need to, first and foremost, design measures to prevent the process of occupational burnout from developing in this group of employees. These activities should mainly focus on preventive and therapeutic programmes aimed at both minimising the risk factors and reducing the excessive work-related mental strain.

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