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This is the author's manuscript

Original Citation:

Availability:

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1672401> since 2022-02-10T14:17:53Z

Published version:

DOI:10.1007/s00420-018-1290-y

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Work-related stress as a cardiovascular risk factor in police officers. A systematic review of evidence.

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Abstract

Purpose

Several studies suggest that work-related stress in police officers may be associated with an increased risk of cardiovascular diseases. A systematic review of studies is, however, still lacking.

Method

According to PRISMA statement, a systematic search of PubMed, ISI Web of Science, Cinahl and PsychInfo electronic databases was undertaken. Studies published in English between 1/1/2000 and 31/12/2016 were included. A studies quality assessment was performed using the Newcastle Ottawa scale (NOS).

Results

The preliminary search retrieved 752 records. After selection, 16 studies (total population 17,698) were retrieved. The average quality of studies was low. Exposure to stress in cross-sectional studies was inconstantly associated with hypertension, obesity, dyslipidaemia, and impaired glucose metabolism. In addition, there was a prevalence of positive studies showing an association between stress and cardiovascular disease morbidity. Studies of higher quality, such as longitudinal studies on large sample size, were more supportive of a significant positive association between stress and cardiovascular risk factors. Results were, however, often conflicting and inconsistent with regard to definitions and measurement of stress, features of individual study design, study conduct, and conclusions drawn.

Conclusions

A sound precautionary principle would be to adopt worksite health promotion programs designed to implement stress management strategies in this category of workers.

Keywords

Police officers · Cardiovascular disease · Cardiovascular risk factors · Stress · Public safety

Introduction

Stress is a ubiquitously present but invisible enemy of the cardiovascular (CV) system. Although the pathophysiological mechanism of action is not completely understood, living through prolonged stressful situations results in brain hyperactivity that increases circulating levels of neuro-hormonal mediators. These molecules affect metabolic processes and inflammatory response, leading to vascular atherosclerosis and cardiovascular diseases (CVD) (Bellisarii et al. 2001; Chandola et al. 2008; Dragano et al. 2017; Kanda and Takahashi 2004; Siegrist 2001; Ueyama et al. 2003; Van Tassell et al. 2015).

Sources of stress can be multifactorial as stress may be the result of traumatic life events or work demands and pressure that are not aligned with individual knowledge and skills and, therefore, challenge personal ability to cope.

Studying stress in the police is particularly important. Police work, in fact, is known to be a physically and psychologically demanding job (Violanti et al. 2006). Police officers may be exposed to highly emotional events as for example when they are involved in physical clashes, witness a fellow officer being badly injured or killed, help battered children or women, or are themselves victims of violence. These kinds of experiences can cause a psychological reaction known as “traumatic grief” that may become pathological and unresolved and, therefore, trigger a chronic post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD is thought to be common among police officers who have to face unexpected threatening events in a highly dangerous context (West et al. 2008; Bowler et al. 2016). In the police force, levels of stress vary considerably in relation with the type of task performed (Patterson 2001). Stressors are sometimes similar to those of other categories of workers. It has been shown that police officers who are assigned to administrative functions or traffic control may also experience high levels of chronic stress based on the organizational, bureaucratic, and procedural requirements of their work. They often complain about work overload, poor career opportunities, lack of resources and inadequate training, low income, difficulties in communicating with superiors, and the perception of being poorly supported by colleagues (Violanti and Aron 1994; Collins and Gibbs 2003; Juniper et al. 2010). In addition, since police activity has to cover 24 h a day, shift schedules may disrupt the circadian rhythm and reduce the quality/quantity of sleep, thus creating a further source of chronic stress when sufficient recovery time is not guaranteed (Garbarino 2014).

Chronic exposure to stressors in this population is associated with neuro-endocrine changes (Violanti et al. 2017), physical and mental illness (Ariani et al. 2010; Arnetz et al. 2013; Garbarino et al. 2013), and may lead to absenteeism (Magnavita and Garbarino 2013a) or presenteeism (Leineweber et al. 2011; Taloyan et al. 2016) in a crucial sector for the safety of society. The magnitude of these phenomena in police sector can be probably underestimated, since the limited data available in the literature as well as the heterogeneity of sick leave measure that not allow comparisons between studies (Körlin et al. 2009). Moreover, it is noteworthy that police officers generally do not have a careful health examination including selected laboratory tests at appropriate intervals after their recruitment, and this prevents the early identification of work-related problems (Pira et al. 2016a).

Of course, being stress a complex and subjective factor, it is not possible to generalize. It has been shown that a single high risk event may be non-stressful (Garbarino et al. 2011). Comparing the levels of stress reported by various groups of workers, on the other hand, shows that police officers are not always more stressed than other employees (Magnavita and Garbarino 2013b).

Despite this hypothetical occupational risk, research regarding CVD in law enforcement personnel is limited, and not all studies demonstrate an increased mortality risk for this category of workers (Zimmerman 2012).

Here, we seek to address this issue by performing a systematic review of all observational studies on the associations between life stress, work stress, and the risk of metabolic syndrome and CVD in police.

Materials and methods

This systematic review is based on the PRISMA statement (Moher et al. 2009). The focus of our question, which followed the PICO scheme, was: “Are police officers with an elevated level of perceived or occupational stress at high risk of metabolic syndrome and CVD in comparison to healthy controls?”

Search strategies

The following databases were incorporated in the systematic search for relevant literature: PubMed, ISI Web of Science, Cinahl, and PsychInfo. The following search terms were used: (cops OR police OR police officer*) AND stress AND (metabolic syndrome OR hypertension OR obesity OR cholesterol OR hypercholesterolemia OR hypertriglyceridemia

OR diabetes OR ischemic heart disease OR cardiovascular disease). The electronic search was accompanied by a hand-search of the reference lists of the articles previously identified.

Study inclusion and exclusion criteria

During the first stage of study selection, the titles and abstracts were screened and evaluated according to the following inclusion criteria: studies published in English between 1/1/2000 and 31/12/2016 with original data (observational, cross-sectional, cohort, and prospective studies) concerning the relationship between stress and CVD or metabolic diseases in police officers. To make a comprehensive evaluation of this issue, we also included studies that had investigated whether stress could trigger CVD development by altering the production of several pro- and anti-athero-genic proteins. Studies on other occupational groups (e.g., military police, firefighters, or other front-line occupations) were not included. Review studies were excluded, but their references were checked for inclusion. We included studies that focused on both cardiac and vascular diseases, their prevalence or incidence, and studies concerning risk factors for CVD, such as hypertension, hypercholesterolemia, hypertriglyceridemia, obesity, and diabetes. Studies that dealt exclusively with stress, its causes and psychosocial consequences, were not included; nor were those that had an outcome other than CVD. Studies that did not measure stress were also excluded.

Study selection

As described in the flow chart (Fig. 1), the preliminary search retrieved 748 studies (311 in PubMed, 303 in ISI web of Science, 57 in Cinhal and 77 in PsycINFO). Four additional papers were included after evaluation of the review studies. Two independent investigators (IC and NM) first reviewed all titles/abstracts to identify potentially relevant articles. They then performed the study selection, based on a full-text review, according to inclusion/exclusion rules. Disagreements were resolved by discussion with a third researcher (SG). When full manuscript texts were not retrievable, the corresponding authors were contacted directly.

Overall a total of 752 potentially relevant titles, 220 duplicate studies had been excluded. 471 publications were excluded on the basis of the title, keywords, and abstract. A further 11 titles were excluded after a second abstract evaluation and discussion with the third reviewer. Two articles that met the inclusion criteria (Kamble and Phalke 2011; Violanti et al. 2006) were not available. After a thorough evaluation of 48 full-text articles, 32 papers were excluded, because they did not fulfill the inclusion criteria. Finally, 16 articles were selected for qualitative assessment (Fig. 1).

Data extraction and quality assessment

Two investigators (IC and NM) independently extracted and inserted into a database the following information: study design, location, year, selection criteria of the sample, number of subjects enrolled with demographic characteristics, methods used for stress assessment, outcomes, adjustment

Two investigators (IC and NM) independently used the Newcastle–Ottawa Scale to evaluate the methodological quality of eligible studies. Disagreements between the authors were resolved by discussion with a third researcher (SG). A quality score was quantified according to three major components: selection of the groups of studies (0–4 points), quality of adjustment for confounding factors (0–2 points) and ascertainment of exposure or outcome of interest in the case–control or cohorts, respectively (0–3 points). The maximum score was 9 points, corresponding to the highest methodological quality (Tables 1, 2).variables and synthetic results.

Evaluation of study quality and risk of bias

Study characteristics are summarized in Tables 1 and 2. Most studies (12; 75%) were cross-sectional, while 4 were prospective or retrospective cohort studies.

The average quality of the studies was low (mean score 3.3 points); quality score ranged from 2 to 6 on the nine-point Newcastle–Ottawa Scale. Sampling was the most frequent epidemiological problem. Studies generally adopted convenience sampling, without randomization. Sample dimensions in cross-sectional studies were often too small to accurately represent the respective police departments. Conversely, some longitudinal studies were conducted on large samples (Chen et al. 2015; Yu et al. 2016) or, if focused on small, highly selected police unit, included the total population and were, therefore, representative of the specific condition investigated (Garbarino and Magnavita 2015). Women were often excluded from the analysis due to their limited number, although the proportion of female police officers can no longer be considered negligible due to a rapid rise in this occupational category in recent years.

Only six studies (Franke et al. 2002, 2010; Maia et al. 2008; Ramey 2003; Walvekar et al. 2015; Wright et al. 2011) had a control group. However, in these studies, controls were not always drawn from the same community as the exposed cohort. Two papers made use of an internal control group by dividing the observed group of police officers into a “high” and “low” level of exposure, based upon measurement of self-perceived stress (Walvekar et al. 2015) or presence of PTSD symptoms (Maia et al. 2008). Other studies, at last, only studied the distribution of the scores of a questionnaire within the group.

Exposure was always ascertained by means of questionnaires. The term stress is used with different meanings in the studies and questionnaires were designed to measure two types of stress: general and work-related stress. The interviews were conducted by phone, or took place during medical examination. With regard to the outcome, some studies adopted as outcome CVD diagnosis, or its symptoms and signs, while the majority evaluated metabolic CV risk factors such as hypertension, hyperlipidemia, diabetes, and obesity that contribute to metabolic syndrome (MetS). CV risk factors were generally physically evaluated through laboratory tests, except in the study of Franke et al. (2002) and Ramey (2003), which relied on self-reported information. Conversely, data on CV morbidity were self-reported in almost all studies, and objectively verified (through radiologic and ultrasound imaging of coronary and carotid arteries and exercise ECG) in only one study (Janczura et al. 2015). Most of the studies did not adjust for confounding risk factors.

Results

Association between stress and MetS

The association between stressful life events and MetS was studied in two cross-sectional studies. An American study conducted on 386 police officers observed a higher prevalence of MetS in workers with a higher perceived stress score than the lower score group, but the difference was not significant (Yoo et al. 2009). A weak but significant association between self-perceived life stress and the prevalence of MetS (OR 1.07 95% CI 1.03–1.13 $p = 0.03$ per one-point score change of the questionnaire) was observed in a convenience sample of 235 Polish officers (Janczura et al. 2015).

Only one longitudinal study evaluated the incidence of MetS in a flying squad of Italian police officers engaged in highstress law enforcement activities. Work stress was continuously assessed for 5 years by means of the demand–control–support model of Karasek (1979) and the effort–reward imbalance model of Siegrist (1996). The metabolic profile was assessed at baseline and at follow-up. In this cohort, police officers in the highest quartile of stress scores had an increased adjusted risk of developing MetS (OR 2.68 95% CI 1.08–6.70 $p < 0.05$). Demand and Effort were significant predictors of MetS (Garbarino and Magnavita 2015).

Association between stress and the components of MetS

Stress and hypertension

Eight studies provided information concerning the relationship between chronic stress and hypertension (Franke et al. 2002; Ganesh et al. 2014; Garbarino and Magnavita 2015; Hartley et al. 2011; Janczura et al. 2015; Ramakrishnan et al. 2013; Ramey 2003; Walvekar et al. 2015). Only two studies had a longitudinal design (Garbarino and Magnavita 2015; Wright et al. 2011). Two different definitions of stress were given: five studies evaluated the degree to which life events were judged to be stressful (self-perceived life stress), three studies evaluated exposure to work-related stress. Most of the available studies evaluated blood pressure after a short rest during clinical examination; in two studies, hypertension was self-reported (Franke et al. 2002; Ramey 2003).

Among studies concerning perceived life stress, three cross-sectional and one longitudinal study showed an association between stress and hypertension, while one study failed to find any statistical significance.

In the aforementioned Polish sample (216 men, 19 women), perceived life stress was significantly associated with systolic ($p = 0.01$) and diastolic ($p = 0.03$) blood pressure (Janczura et al. 2015).

A significant correlation between self-reported general stress and hypertension was observed among 2,818 male law enforcement officers enrolled from nine North American states (Franke et al. 2002; Ramey 2003). Perceived stress was associated with diastolic blood pressure ($\beta = 0.16$; $p = 0.039$), but not with systolic blood pressure in a sample of 105 male American middle-aged law enforcement officers who were followed for almost 7 years (Wright et al. 2011). A significant association between stress levels and hypertension (aOR 2.89, 95% CI 1.42–5.84) was reported by Ramakrishnan et al. (2013) in a survey carried out on a group of Indian policemen (256), mostly police constables. Another Indian study observed an association between a moderate level of perceived stress and the risk of having high blood pressure (aOR 2.37 95% CI 1.24–4.53), but there was no linearity between stress levels and hypertension (Ganesh et al. 2014).

Conversely, the study of Walvekar et al. (2015), that divided 108 male Indian police constables into two groups by stress score, found no significant difference in average blood pressure values between stressed and non-stressed officers. Hartley et al. (2011) failed to find an association between work-related stress and hypertension in 102 female officers from the BCOPS (Buffalo Cardio-metabolic Occupational Police Study). No significant increase in the incidence of hypertension was found in the aforementioned Italian prospective study on a small sample of policemen followed for 5 years (Garbarino and Magnavita 2015).

Stress and obesity

Data concerning the relationship between stress and adiposity were extrapolated from five studies: three measured “general perceived stress” (Janczura et al. 2015; Walvekar et al. 2015; Wright et al. 2011) and two “work-related stress” (Garbarino and Magnavita 2015; Hartley et al. 2011).

As outcome variables, one study measured waist circumference (WC), three both WC and body mass index (BMI), and one the waist/hip ratio.

The level of perceived stress appeared to be correlated with WC ($r = 0.17$, $p = 0.03$) in the Polish sample (Janczura et al. 2015) and in the sample of 105 middle-aged American police officers who were followed over a 7-year time span (Wright et al. 2011). A significant association between work-related stress and abdominal obesity (OR 1.37, 95% CI 1.04–1.81) was also found in the BCOPS cross-sectional study (Hartley et al. 2011). Conversely, no significant association was found between stress and obesity in the cross-sectional study of Walvekar et al. (2015) nor in the longitudinal study of Garbarino and Magnavita (2015).

Stress and dyslipidemia

Six studies examined the influence of work stress (Garbarino and Magnavita 2015; Hartley et al. 2011), post-traumatic stress (Maia et al. 2008), and perceived life stress (Chen et al. 2015; Janczura et al. 2015; Walvekar et al. 2015) on dyslipidemia, defined as high total cholesterol (> 200 mg/dL), or low high-density lipoprotein cholesterol (HDL-C) (< 40 mg/dL) or elevated triglycerides (> 150 mg/dL).

The results of the cross-sectional studies on perceived stress were conflicting. Janczura et al. (2015) found a significant correlation between a high score on the perceived stress scale and triglyceride plasma levels ($r = 0.19$, $p = 0.002$); conversely Walvekar et al. (2015) failed to find an association between stress and lipid levels.

The longitudinal study that evaluated the impact of psychological distress on dyslipidemia among 3300 Chinese police officers (criminal investigators, traffic controllers, public security, etc.) found a significant association between psychological distress and incident dyslipidemia (HR = 1.15; 95% CI 1.05–1.26) after a 4-year follow-up. Traffic controllers in this cohort had a higher rate of incident dyslipidemia compared to policemen assigned to other duties (Chen et al. 2015).

Studies on work-related stress consistently reported an association. The cross-sectional study on female BCOPS of Hartley et al. (2011) found a significant association between self-reported work-related stress and elevated triglycerides (OR = 1.57, 95% CI 1.02–2.43) and low HDL-C (OR = 1.33, 95% CI 1.06–1.69). The longitudinal study on Italian police officers showed an association between high work stress level and increased incidence of hypertriglyceridemia (aOR 7.86, 95% CI 1.29–48.04). The observed sample was, however, rather small, and the confidence intervals (CI) of the study are too wide to allow for a safe interpretation. The HDL-C mean level was lower in the high-stress group than the low-stress officers, but the difference in incident hypercholesterolemia failed to reach significance (aOR 1.57, 95% CI 0.40–6.25 ns) (Garbarino and Magnavita 2015).

A study of 118 members of a highly trained unit of the Brazilian police force, which was deployed only in critical situations, found that police officers who suffered from PTSD after acute traumatic events had significantly higher total cholesterol and triglyceride concentrations than those without PTSD, after controlling for age, educational level, BMI, tobacco, alcohol use, and beta-blockers (Maia et al. 2008).

Stress and glucose metabolism

Walvekar et al. (2015) suggested that chronic life stress could affect glucose metabolism, since they observed a significant difference in fasting blood glucose and glycosylated hemoglobin levels between stressed male Indian police constables (41 persons) and the non-stressed group (67 persons).

In the aforementioned Buffalo study, lack of support at work was positively associated with the risk of having glucose intolerance in a group of 102 female police officers (OR 1.37 95% CI 1.01–1.84) (Hartley et al. 2011).

Two studies addressed prospectively the association between chronic work stress and incidence of diabetes in Italian and Chinese police officers, respectively. Both studies showed an increased incidence of glucose intolerance that was not significant in the small Italian cohort (Garbarino and Magnavita 2015), but highly significant in the larger Chinese study that enrolled 5811 police officers (traffic controllers, criminal investigators, public security agent, and others) who were followed for 4 years (Yu et al. 2016). Specific stress factors, such as role overload (RO), role boundary (RB), physical environment (PE), interpersonal strain (IS), and physical strain (PHS) were associated with the incidence of diabetes after adjustment for confounding factors.

Association between stress and CVD or markers of disease

The studies that investigated the relationship between stress and CV risk were divided into two groups: four collected data on CV morbidity by interviewing law enforcement officers (Franke et al. 2002; Janczura et al. 2015; Ramey 2003; Ramey et al. 2011) and two determined the levels of pro- and anti-atherogenic markers implicated in the pathogenesis and clinical course of atherosclerotic vascular disease (Franke et al. 2010; Ramey et al. 2012).

In their studies on 2,818 male officers (mean age 37.3 years), enrolled from nine North American states, Franke et al. (2002), and subsequently Ramey (2003) found an association between self-reported stress and CVD morbidity ($\eta^2 = 0.003$; $p = 0.008$). Interestingly, perceived stress levels were affected significantly by duration of time in the law enforcement profession ($p = 0.004$) while CVD by age only ($p = 0.022$).

A statistically significant association between perceived general stress and self-reported CVD (angina, stroke or myocardial infarction) was also found by Ramey et al. (2011) in a convenience sample of 272 urban police officers from the Midwest of the USA (OR 1.20, 95% CI 1.03–1.39). The same study also observed an association between vital exhaustion and CVD (OR 1.31, 95% CI 1.12–1.53).

In a convenience sample, Janczura et al. (2015) found a barely significant association between perceived stress and the prevalence of coronary plaque (Or = 1.05, 95% CI 1.001–1.10, $p = 0.04$).

Studies on work stress and biological change of proand anti-atherogenic markers were performed by American researchers. In the first study (Franke et al. 2010), the research group measured circulating levels of inflammatory markers and the perception of chronic stress in a convenience group of 444 law enforcement officers from Iowa, and in a smaller comparison group from the general population.

Even if cytokines IL-1 β , IL-6, TNF- α were significantly higher in officers than in controls, indicating a more pronounced pro-inflammatory effect, no significant association between stress levels and inflammatory mediators was found.

Another study carried out on a smaller sample of policemen (71 persons) reported that interleukins (IL-6 and IL-4) were significantly related to perceived stress, and IL-1 β and IL-4 were associated with job demand (Ramey et al. 2012).

Discussion

Data from literature showed that police officers' exposure to stress was inconstantly associated with hypertension, obesity, dyslipidaemia, impaired glucose metabolism, and MetS. In addition, some studies showed an association between stress and CVD morbidity. Studies of higher quality, such as longitudinal studies on large sample size (thousands of subjects) or on homogenous group of police officers, whose stress levels were regularly monitored, were more supportive of a significant positive association between stress and CV risk factors.

These findings can be compared with those of the previous reviews and meta-analysis on the influence of stress on CVD outcomes among different group of workers or general population.

A recent review of studies on over 600,000 men and women from 27 cohort studies in Europe, the USA and Japan suggests that work stressors, such as job strain and long working hours, are associated with a moderately elevated risk of incident coronary heart disease and stroke. The excess risk for exposed individuals is 10–40% compared with subjects in whom such stressors are absent (Kivimäki and Kawachi 2015).

An overview of two systematic reviews on work-related stress concluded that there was modest (1.32, 95% CI 1.09–1.59; Virtanen et al. 2013) to moderate evidence (1.45, 95% CI 1.15–1.84; Kivimäki et al. 2006) of an association between psychosocial stress at work and CV outcomes (Fishta and Backé 2015; Kivimäki et al. 2006; Virtanen et al. 2013). In line with the results of the previous reviews, Wilson et al. (2014) found a significant positive association between work-related stress and risk of atherosclerosis, assessed via carotid intima-media thickness (CIMT) evaluation. A meta-analysis

focused on workers who had an acute coronary heart disease (CHD) event, indicated that work stress increase the risk of developing recurrent CVD events by 65% (Li et al. 2015).

Regarding CV risk factors, a systematic review of 39 prospective cohort studies supported an association between chronic psychosocial stress and the development of MetS (Bergmann et al. 2014).

With respect to hypertension, a review providing an updated synthesis of the literature from 2010 to April 2014 found an association between occupational stress and blood pressure (Cuffee et al. 2014). A more consistent adverse effect was observed among men than women and in studies of higher methodological quality (Babu et al. 2014; Gilbert- Ouimet et al. 2014; Landsbergis et al. 2013). In line with this review, researchers have observed a trend toward a positive association between work-related stress and dyslipidemia as well as impaired glucose metabolism, although the number of studies is not enough to make a definite statement (Bergmann et al. 2014).

The association of stress with weight gain observed in many studies included in this review do not seem to agree with a recent review that failed to find evidence to support the hypothesis that job strain is a risk factor for obesity (Kivimäki et al. 2015).

This review is the first attempt that has been made to identify and critically assess published studies that investigated the relationship between stress and CVD in police officers.

Although most studies included in this review concluded that there was an association between stress and CVD as well as CV risk factors and these findings are consistent with current scientific knowledge, the evidence supporting an increase in CV risk in police officer due to high level of perceived stress is rather weak.

Results were, however, often conflicting and inconsistent with regard to definitions and measurement of stress, features of individual study design, study conduct, and conclusions drawn.

The epidemiological weaknesses of most cross-sectional studies, the scarcity of longitudinal studies and the different definitions adopted for both exposure (life stress, perceived stress, work-related chronic and acute stress) and outcome (CV morbidity, CV risk factors) may have affected the study findings and require a cautious interpretation. The heterogeneous nature and limited number of studies prevented us from performing a quantitative data synthesis in the way of meta-analysis.

The definition of exposure is undoubtedly the most critical aspect. Stress is challenging to readily and objectively measured, because it is based upon individual perception and may fluctuate over the time. Although we were interested in evaluating the impact of occupational stress on CVD risk among police officers, most of the studies available provided a general non-specific measure of perceived stress that included both general and occupational stress. Furthermore, except for one study (Garbarino and Magnavita 2015), the measurement of stress in a single time point (generally at the beginning of the study) does not allow to evaluate changes in exposure, nor to identify chronically exposed subjects who could have a higher CV risk than controls. The number of subjects recruited in many studies is modest, and often, convenience samples are used. Women are often under-represented and the issue of gender health in police has never been studied.

As we mentioned above, police officers experience frequent and ongoing job stressors including those unique to their profession (exposure to aggression and violence) and those similar to the type of stressors present in other occupational categories (organizational, bureaucratic, and procedural). Operational stressors, which deal with violent situations, had a highly emotional impact but they occur less frequent than organizational stressors that, therefore, may be perceived as more stressful than the former (Collins and Gibbs 2003; Violanti et al. 2016). None of the studies included in this review have assessed the individual emotional response to both acute and chronic work-related stressful conditions, thus making it difficult to determine to what extent work-related psychosocial factors in police work enhance the risk for CVD. In addition, studies tend to homogenize police officers into very broad categories and do not consider the relevance or

importance of within-group stressors that depend on the kind of task they performed and determine the level of perceived stress for each police section. In fact, the police officers performed a vast number of tasks, some of which may expose them to stressful emotional factors, while those dealing mainly with administrative tasks have a very different risk profile. Another general challenge in interpreting occupational epidemiology studies on police officers is that of selection. Police officers are selected according to their capacity to cope with stress. At the entry, they underwent a personality and physical testing to prove if they had the appropriate characteristics for fulfilling the role of police officers. Therefore, they showed higher level of physical and mental health compared to general population (Garbarino et al. 2013). Studies on police officers exclusively devoted to law enforcement showed that they have a prevailing personality pattern of high stability/low neuroticism, which is in turn associated with high resilience and moderates the effects of workload (Chiorri et al. 2015; Garbarino et al. 2012, 2014).

In addition, over the years of service workers with known cardiac disease may self-select into jobs with lesser degrees of work-related stress or leave the work force entirely. Workers in high strain jobs who subsequently develop cardiac disease may shift out of those positions to new ones with potential lower degrees of work-related stress.

Conclusion

In view of these findings, further well-designed studies, based on randomized samples and comparable controls, are needed.

Although there is still no firm evidence of the association between police stress and CVD, a sound precautionary principle would be to adopt worksite health promotion programs designed to implement stress management strategies and improve the lifestyle and eating habits of this category of workers.

Based on this principle, the Italian Association of Occupational Health (SIMLII) issued in 2016 a set of guidelines for health surveillance of police that recommend a holistic assessment of workers aimed at promoting health and maintaining well-being (Pira et al. 2016b). These guidelines were adopted by the Italian State Police and implemented in 2017.

The early identification of subjects at risk and the screening for psychological and psychiatric disorders are essential to prevent disease and establishing effective improvement of health levels, as well as proper treatment of CV and metabolic diseases.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The study was not funded. The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Figure 1: Systematic literature review process

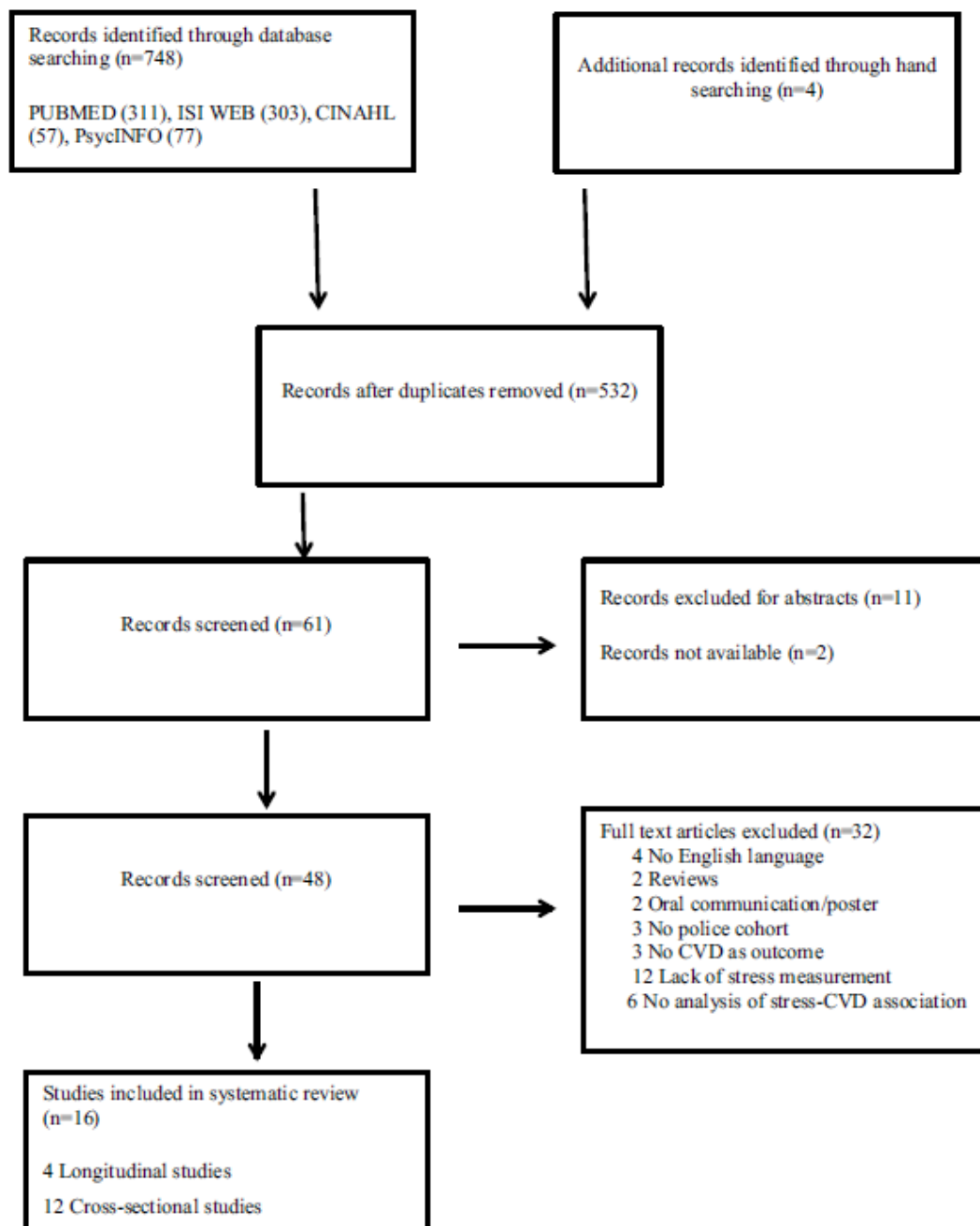


Table 1 Studies concerning the relationship between stress and metabolic syndrome or its components

References	Study design	Study quality	Sample size (location)	Population (mean age or age range)	Controls (n, mean age)	Exposure (questionnaire)	Outcome	Adjustment variables	Main results
Yoo et al. (2009)	Cross-sectional	☆☆☆	386 M (USA)	Sworn police officers (23–60 years)	–	PSS score	MetS	–	Regression coefficient $r=0.047$ ($p>0.05$)
Hartley et al. (2011)	Cross-sectional	☆☆	390, 288 M, 102 F (USA)	Sworn police officers (41 years)	–	Spielberger Police Stress Survey	CV risk factors	–	Women: abdominal obesity OR 1.37 (95% CI 1.04–1.81); elevated triglycerides: OR 1.57 (95% CI 1.02–2.43); low HDL OR 1.33 (95% CI 1.06–1.69)
Ramakrishnan et al. (2013)	Cross-sectional	☆☆	256 M (India)	Police constables (40.9 years)	–	Professional life stress score questionnaire	Hypertension	Age, gender, BMI	Stress was associated with hypertension (aOR 2.89, 95% CI 1.42–5.84) ($p=0.003$)
Ganesh et al. (2014)	Cross-sectional	☆☆	296 (India)	Police officers with hypertension (25–59 years)	–	Cohen's Perceived Stress scale	Hypertension	–	OR (95% CI) (p value) Very High: 1.48 (0.35–6.21) (0.58) High: 2.21 (0.84–5.8) (0.10) Moderate: 2.37 (1.2–4.53) (0.009)
Walvekar et al. (2015)	Cross-sectional	☆☆☆☆	108 M (India)	Stressed Police constables (41 years)	Non-stressed group (67)	PSS score: 35.78 (stressed); 22.42 (non-stressed)	Blood Glucose	–	Higher levels of blood glucose ($p<0.001$) Higher HbA1c ($p<0.001$)
Janczura et al. (2015)	Cross-sectional	☆☆	235; 216 M, 19 F (Poland)	Police officers (27–58 years)	–	PSS score: 17.5 (MetS+), 15.7 (MetS–)	CV risk factors; Coronary plaque prevalence	–	MetS prevalence $p=0.003$ Waist Circumference $p=0.03$ Triglycerides ($p=0.002$) BP (syst $p=0.01$, diast $p=0.03$) Coronary plaque prevalence OR 1.05 (95% CI 1.001–1.10) ($p=0.04$)
Maia et al. (2008)	Cross-sectional	☆☆☆☆☆	118 M (Brazil)	Police officers with PTSD (28 years)	Police officers without PTSD	PTSD checklist Civilian Version	Dyslipidemia	–	PTSD + vs PTSD– Total cholesterol ($p=0.001$) Triglycerides ($p=0.004$)
Wright et al. (2011)	Longitudinal (follow-up: 7 years)	☆☆☆☆	105 M (USA)	LEOs (42.7 years)	Non LEOs group (65, 48.3 years)	PSS	CV risk factors	–	Regression coefficient (p value) DBP ($\beta=0.16$ $p=0.04$) waist circumference ($\beta=0.27$ $p=0.002$)
Chen et al. (2015)	Longitudinal (follow-up: 4 years)	☆☆☆☆☆	5867 (China)	Police officers: (36.7 years)	–	SCL-90-R GSI = 1.33 (1.13–1.71)	Dyslipidemia	–	HR (95% CI) (p value) Dyslipidemia 1.15 (1.05–1.26) ($p=0.004$) High Tot Col: 1.22 (1.08–1.37) ($p=0.001$)
Garbarino and Magnavita (2015)	Longitudinal (follow-up: 5 years)	☆☆☆☆	235 M (Italy)	Police officers from a flying column (35.4 years)	–	DCS ERI	CV risk factors	Social and demographic factors	aOR (95% CI) MetS: 2.68 (1.08–6.70) Hypertriglyceridemia: 7.86 (1.29–48.04) Reduced HDL: 1.57 (0.40–6.25)

Yu et al. (2016)	Longitudinal (follow-up: 4 years)	☆☆☆☆☆	5811 (China)	Police officers 5811 (36.7 years)	–	OSI-R	Type 2 Diabetes mellitus	–	RO: HR 1.574 (95% CI 1.071–2.372) RB HR 1.645 (95% CI 1.144–2.365) PE: HR 2.292 (95% CI 1.545–3.400) IS: HR 1.537 (95% CI 1.079–2.191) PHS: HR 1.680 (95% CI 1.167–2.006)
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aOR adjusted odds ratio; *BMI* body mass index; *BP* blood pressure; *CV* cardiovascular; *DBP* diastolic blood pressure; *DCS* demand–control–support; *syst* systolic pressure; *dias* diastolic pressure; *ERI* effort–reward imbalance; *HR* hazard ratio; *F* female; *GSI* global severity index; *HbA1c* glycosylated hemoglobin; *HDL* high-density lipoprotein; *High Tot Chol* high total cholesterol; *LEOs* law enforcement officers; *M* male; *MetS* metabolic syndrome; *OR* odds ratio; *OSI-R* occupational stress inventory-revised questionnaire; *PSS* perceived stress scale; *PTSD* post-traumatic stress disease; *SCL-90-R* symptom check list-90-revised; *triglyc* triglycerides *OSI-R* items; *PE* physical environment; *IS* interpersonal strain; *PHS* physical strain; *RB* role boundary; *RO* role overload

Table 2 Studies concerning the relationship between stress and cardiovascular morbidity

References	Study design	Study quality	Sample size (location)	Population (mean age or age range)	Controls (mean age)	Exposure (questionnaire)	Outcome	Main results
Franke et al. (2002)	Cross-sectional	☆☆	2818 M (USA)	Sworn police officers (37.3 years)	General population (8046; 41.7 years)	PSS	CVD	Stress contributed to CVD morbidity OR 1.05 (95% CI 1–1.10) ($p < 0.05$)
Ramey (2003)	Cross-sectional	☆☆	2818 M (USA)	Sworn police officers (37.3 years)	General population (9650, 45.3 years)	PSS	CVD	Stress contributed to CVD morbidity OR 1.05 (95% CI 1–1.10) ($p < 0.05$)
Ramey et al. (2011)	Cross-sectional	☆☆	336, 272 M, 42 F (USA)	Urban police officers (41.2 years)	–	PSS; VE	CVD morbidity	OR (95% CI) (p value) Perceived stress 1.20 (1.03–1.39) ($p < 0.05$) VE: 1.31 (1.12–1.53) ($p < 0.01$)
Ramey et al. (2012)	Cross-sectional	☆☆☆	71, 75% M, 25% F (USA)	Police officers (42.2 years)	–	PSS, JCQ, ERI, IES, aggression questionnaire	Inflammatory mediators	A unit increase of job demand is associated with an average 3% increase of TNF- α , and 88% increase in IL-1 β A unit increase in effort is associated with an average 5% increase of TNF- α
Franke et al. (2010)	Cross-sectional	☆☆	444; 322 M, 22 F (USA)	Police officers (37.4 years)	Industrial workers, firefighters (166, 132 M, 34 F, 42 years)	PSS, VE; ERI; social support	Inflammatory mediators	Less than 4% of the variance in any of the inflammatory mediators was explained by any of the stress measures

CVD cardiovascular diseases; *ERI* effort–reward imbalance; *F* female; *JCQ* job content questionnaire; *IES* impact of events scale; *IL-1 β* interleukin 1-beta; *M* male; *OR* odds ratio; *PSS* perceived stress scale; *TNF- α* tumor necrosis factor alpha; *VE* vital exhaustion