

Research Article

Influence of Structural and Institutional Practices on Depression among Police Officers in the National Police Service of Kenya

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Abstract

Recent statistics reveal that about 12, 000 police officers are facing mental health challenges as a result of work related issues. In fact, statistics from the NPS (National Police Service) indicate that between 12-13% of officers have mental challenges. As a result, there have been efforts aimed at training senior police officers in order to better diagnose these psychological issues whenever they arise in their junior officers and institute remedial measures. However, these measures are not institutionalized in the police structure and as such, are not entrenched fully in the police structure. This study therefore seeks to assess the extent to which these measures have influenced the management of depression among police officers. It will be guided by the institutional theory to argue that for measures that are aimed at impacting on the members in an institution, they must be institutionalized. The study is guided by the following two objectives: 1) to establish the influence of promotion policy on depression among police officers in the NPS and 2) to discuss the influence of workload on depression among police officers. The study utilizes a qualitative approach in data collection and analysis from which data is collected using interviews police reports, newspaper articles and expert opinions as well as journals. In total, 20 police officers from five police stations were interviewed. These included: Central police station, Kamukunji police station, Kasarani police station and Parklands police station. At the same time, the head of Human Resource at the NPS was also interviewed. The data is analyzed using thematic analysis where the data is arranged into themes based on the objectives of the study and discussed. It is expected that the findings will be useful in policy making, particularly that which will guide the national police service and other national security agencies.

Keywords: Structural and Institutional Practices, Depression, Police Officers.

Introduction

According to WHO (2021), depression is a common mental disorder that affects an estimated 5% of adults globally. Besides being a leading cause of disability, depression is also a major contributor to the overall global burden of disease. The worldwide statistics from WHO (2021) indicates that approximately 280 million people suffer from depression. In fact, over 700,000 deaths a year are reported as a result of depression (WHO, 2021). In Africa, Ishmael (2022) reports that about 29.19 million people suffer from depression, with many cases (7 million), from Nigeria. This is attributable to a myriad of issues. One of them is functional dependency coupled with a reduced quality of life. Similarly, Bernard (2017) adds that another cause of depression in Africa is knowledge of HIV infection and that explains the reason as to why there is a high population of PLWHA who have been diagnosed with depression in comparison with those who are not infected. The statistics in some parts of Africa are as follows: Angola 3.6%, Benin 3.9%, Botswana 4.7%, Burundi 4.2%, Cameroon 3.9%, Chad 3.5%, Ghana 4.2%, Lesotho 4.8%, Mozambique 4.1% and Mali 3.6% (Ishmael, 2022).

In Kenya, Nyongesa (2017) reports that Kenya has about 1.9 million depression cases and has been ranked fifth among African countries with the highest number of depression cases after South Africa. One of the challenges of these statistics is that there are so many people who are undergoing depression at community level but don't report. Many people as Nyongesa (2017) states, still shy off from reporting these cases. The

main causes of depression in Kenya include: diagnosis of HIV, unemployment, education (particularly those at the university), economic deprivation and academic performance.

According to Ombati (2022), there are high incidences of depression among police officers in Kenya that go unreported. In fact, the National Police Service Commission (NPSC) (2021) reported that out of the 110,000 police officers in the country, 12-13% of them suffer from depression. Among the causes that trigger depression among these officers include: financial issues, marriage wrangles, transfers, working far from friends and exposure to stressful work (NPSC, 2021). These conditions have, as Ombati (2022) avers, seen a spike of incidents involving police officers engaging in murder and suicide. In order to address this, there have been measures put in place. For example, according to the ICJ (2022), before 2019, the training of police officers emphasized work-related skills. However in light of recent trends, the inspector general has placed equal emphasis on the mental wellness of police officers in a bid to improve service delivery. This plan is to give the police officers tools to recognize trauma in themselves, other officers and the community in the detection, management and treatment of psychological conditions among them. It is against this background that the study investigates the influence of the structural and institutional practices of managing depression among police officers.

Statement of the Problem

According to Njenga (2022), police officers are heavily exposed to mental challenges due to the nature of their work. These challenges range from tight work schedule, being exposed to tragedies, financial challenges, and marital as well as poor working relationships with their bosses. Because of these challenges, they need psychosocial support in order to manage the stressors. According to Kegoro (2022), the NPS has put in place several mechanisms to support affected officers. These range from deployment and transfer of affected officers, training county commanders to enable them to deal effectively with mental cases affecting junior officers as well as not discriminating those who disclose their mental challenges and addressing mental challenges of the retired officers. Besides, the NPS has also kicked off a sensitization program in efforts to address the mental health concerns of the police officers. However, despite these measures in place, the incidents of police suicides, murder and display of underlying mental health issues is still on the rise. Therefore, it becomes necessary to examine the extent to which the institutional and structural measures that are in place have managed to address depression among the police officers.

Objectives

The study is guided by two objectives.

- 1) To establish the influence of promotion policy on depression among police officers in the NPS.
- 2) Discuss the influence of workload on depression among police officers.

Literature Review

Depression is a serious mental and medical condition in which an individual is unable to carry out normal duties or activities of the day. As such, persons experiencing depression need serious psycho-social support in order to enable them cope with it. According to Wakil (2015), emotional support is very significant, particularly to police officers. The support can be provided verbally or can be made evident by simply being available and listening to the officers. When the officer has a problem, the immediate superior or a care giver at the police facility may provide support and be concerned on what the officer is experiencing (Wakil, 2015). At the same time, they also need informational support which, as Kegoro (2022) posits, involves an individual providing support in form of information needed to manage demands or problems. For example, a member of the officer's church may provide information to him or her regarding a community assistance program in order to help alleviate problems associated with work-family conflict. Similarly, a family member or friend may provide information in the form of advice, based on their own experiences that may help in terms of managing competing roles (Wakil, 2015).

Apart from peer support, social bonds play the role of support process. A study by Territo and Vetter (2011) looked at the most important people surrounding a person who has experienced a traumatizing event. The study revealed that, immediately after an incident occurs, colleagues, family members and then the boss may be seen as important in helping the police officer to cope with his/her challenges. After a number of weeks, the most important person may be the boss, family and then the colleague. A study conducted among Israel troops going on a mission, revealed that military personnel with a private environment that is relatively stable, are less vulnerable to trauma. This highlights that peers may be important to uniformed workers who just experienced a potentially traumatic event. However, next to colleagues, supervisors, family and social workers may be important too (Territo and Vetter, 2011).

Having a healthy marriage and relationships may provide support to the officers. Police officers work for longer periods hence may develop stress. Supportive spouses may help in minimizing stressors and distractions that may affect spouse's relationships. An understanding couple and family may play a bigger role in improving the immune system of the officer therefore, reducing rates of illness and become conscious about their health. These couples may have a longer life span unlike those in unhealthy or unhappy marriages (Territo and Vetter, 2021).

According to the ICJ (2022), several measures have been instituted in order to address this issue in the NPS. For example, a task force was established in 2020 to investigate the causes of mental health challenges among police officers. The taskforce was pursuant to Article 246 of the constitution of Kenya which creates the National Police Service Commission, whose mandate is to independently look at police welfare, career progression and other aspects of human resource management. The task force was to look at the issues surrounding the welfare of the officers as well as the mechanisms in place to enhance effective and efficient interventions of police mental welfare. According to Kegoro (2022), the panelists acknowledged that there was a growing number of reported cases and incidents of police officers being perpetrators of domestic violence, alcoholism, absenteeism from work and in extreme cases, murder and attempted suicide. It noted that as much as several efforts have been put in place by the NPS to advance the psychological well-being of police officers, a multi-sectoral approach would be most suitable.

The task force recommended to the NPS that it assess and addresses institutional and administrative challenges which contribute to occupational distress in the police work force. Lastly, it tasked the commanding officers in the NPS to ensure that there is the creation of exemplary reporting environment where junior officers can freely report cases of mental distress. Therefore, from this perspective, it can be seen that measures to handle depression have been a key concern in the NPS and the NPSC. It thus precludes a gap in knowledge to establish the extent to which these measures have been successful.

Methodology

The study mainly utilized qualitative approach in the collection, collation, analysis and presentation of data. Specifically, data was collected using interviews with key informants who included the head of human resource at the NPS and 20 police officers from five police stations in Nairobi. These stations included: Kamukunji police station, Central police station, Parklands police station and Kasarani police station. They were asked about their experiences at the NPS with regards to promotions policy and workload and how that affects the psycho-social state of police officers. The study also employed content analysis; this involved reviewing data from policy documents about the nature of operations of the NPS. This data was sourced from NPS reports, Acts of Parliament, master plans as well as journal articles, internet sources and authoritative commentaries in newspapers on the issue of mental health and NPS practices. Analysis was based on thematic analysis. This entailed parading the responses with the objectives and discussing them in prose and narration. Being a desktop review, there was heavy reliance on these reports because it was perceived that these reports outline the structural and institutional frameworks that guide the police system. In order to compliment the data that was collected from these sources, an interview was conducted with the human resource officer in charge at the NPS headquarters. This was because the division deals with the welfare of the police officers in the service and was deemed to be the most ideal in shedding light on matters affecting the work of the police officers.

Findings and Discussions

The Influence of Promotion Policy on Depression among Police Officers in the NPS

The promotion of police is articulated in the National Police Service Commission Act and the National Police Service Act. Several determinants are put in place when considering promotions, these include; existence of an appropriate vacancy, an officer satisfying the criteria for promotion, promotional course training among others. At the same time, in determining promotions, an officer's disciplinary issue may not be considered for promotion until the lapse of 6 months from the date of the disciplinary offence. Part 2(b) states that:

'An officer who is found guilty of a disciplinary offence may not be considered for promotion until the lapse of a timeframe, in determining promotions, an officer's disciplinary record shall be taken into account' (NPS Act 3013).

However, these provisions have in many cases instigated depression among police officers, more so if the disciplinary case in question was choreographed by senior officers as was revealed with an interview with one police officer:

'Promotions are rarely merit-based. It depends on one's connections. In few cases, one gets promoted as a result of merit but in many cases, officers stagnate in one grade. Besides, educational qualifications are never factored in when considering promotions. This makes police officers demoralized and personally it has on many occasions led to depression' (KII 001, Police officer, Kasarani police station).

A study by Alrena (2008) found out that there was a correlation between those officers who manifested depression with those who have disciplinary issues. This could be as a result of the frustrations that they undergo under the law on promotions which renders them ineligible for promotion to certain ranks. Therefore, as it is, the promotion policy needs to be reviewed to have provisions for recourse for those officers with disciplinary cases to interact with counselors in an attempt to help them cope up with their positions and at the same time enable the service not to discriminate against them.

The issue of promotions of police officers has been a bone of contention particularly with regards to the powers of the NPS and the NPSC. Angira (2023), reports that the NPSC (National Police Service Commission) accused the Inspector General (IG) of usurping its powers, particularly its human resource functions. The NPSC complained of challenges and impediments including failure of the IG to implement its decisions. For example, a case was cited of the IG violating the NPSC Act when he unilaterally promoted police officers without involving the NPSC. As a result, Angira (2023) posited that these actions of the IG resulted into numerous accusations from the NPSC of irregular and unprocedural decisions that have ethical, legal and public finance implications. They accused the IG of favoritism in these promotions through the failure to use a fair and competitive criteria set out in the law. Ideally, Otega (2020) avers that a clear look at the Article 246 (1), the commission referred to is a civilian authority to which the national police service is subordinate to because the Article 293 (5) stipulates that the national security organs are subordinate to civilian authority. However, in an interview with the head of human resource of the NPS, the following was established:

In the NPS, we place a lot of emphasis on one's conduct. Being a disciplined force, we always keep track of an officer's discipline when we are considering promotions. Therefore it is not true that we are discriminatory. There are well laid down guidelines that we follow and we always ensure that we vet all promotions on a case-by-case basis' (KII002 H.R. NPS).

At the same time, in some cases, the issue of promotions is usually a structural and institutional by nature. For example, Wanga (2023) cites an incident in the NPS and NPSC in which there was a standoff between the two offices in which the NPSC revoked promotions and declined to approve them as, according to them, they were unlawful and un-procedurally done. The IG, according to them, has no such authority to make such pronouncements. Instead, they advertised 514 positions for promotions. On his part, responded by warning his officers not to apply the positions or risk disciplinary action. Such standoffs put the police officers in mental anguish because they ultimately end up being the sufferers as a result of reasons beyond them. Although there are marked overlaps, the law stipulates the functions of the NPSC clearly in chapter 14 of the constitution, which gives NPSC a mandate to:

'Recruit and appoint persons to hold or act in officers in the service, confirm appointments and promotions in the NPS, exercise disciplinary control over the officers and remove persons holding or acting in officers within the service' (Kenyan Constitution Chapter 14).

On the other hand, the law gives the IG the functions of implementing policy decisions, auditing police operations, coordinating all police operations, preparing budgetary estimates and developing a policing plan, determine the establishment and maintenance of police stations, posts, outposts, units or unit bases and determine the boundaries of police stations and distribution and deployment of officers in the service. According to Michi (2023), these legal and institutional overlaps between the NPS and the NPSC have led to grumbling among the officers, particularly graduate officers. This group, as Michi (2023) reports, accuses the NPS of deliberately sidelining them when it comes to promotions. As a result, their morale and zeal for the job has been shattered.

For example, there are those officers who joined the service in 2012 and posted to job group J with a basic salary of 32,000 with a yearly increment of 1,000. Many are retained as constables. Those who go for interviews find that their degrees are not considered for promotion and as such, they remain in the same rank while those who have fewer qualifications are given the promotions. This creates a lot of dissatisfaction among them which explodes into depression. For example, in Naivasha, a corporal was arrested after

shooting of a sergeant and in Riruta police station an inspector was shot after a confrontation with junior officers among many other incidents (Kiage, 2021).

The Influence of Workload on Depression among Police Officers

According to Hirsi (2014), a majority of the police officers are stressed as a result of their workloads and nature of their tasks. This makes many of the officers dissatisfied with their jobs and some even contemplate quitting and this accrues a lot of stress levels to them. Kiage (2021) affirms that what the police officers undergo in the course of their duty exposes them to stress. This includes domestic violence, homicides, and horrific car crashes. At times, they are sent to keep law where they brutally engage with rioters. This clearly came out from one of the interviews with a police officer who stated as follows:

'At times we find ourselves doing daunting tasks. For example, cleaning accident scenes or even murder scenes. Such tasks stick into our minds and in some cases bring a lot of stress to us' (KII 005, Kamukunji Police Station).

Another police officer from Central police station also weighed in by stating that:

Patrolling the whole night or chasing criminals presents a challenge to us as much as it is our duty. We lack time with our family members and at the same time find ourselves even to address personal issues. (KII 007, Central Police Station).

According to Steers (2020), repeated exposure to these cases has been associated with developmental or critical conditions which include: burnout, somatization, anxiety and eventually depression among the police officers. The rate at which depression was being manifested among police officers was so serious until the then Cabinet secretary, Dr. Fred Matian'gi stated as follows: 'It is a rude awakening to the psychosocial challenges amongst some of our young officers that we have no choice but to now pay greater attention to it'. According to the Green String Network (2022), police officers are also exposed to stress inherent in their job, but which exceeds the stress manifested in other professions. They are exposed to death and trauma more than troops of war. This is because they respond to every case of suicide, murder and fatal accident and yet they are expected to maintain a firm unresponsive stature owing to the nature of their job as law enforcers. This was also cited by the HR unit at the NPS:

In most cases, the police officers who manifest depression are those who are usually given grisly tasks to execute, particularly the traffic officers at accident scenes of homicide officials who deal with disturbing scenes. However, we usually ensure that they are well prepared for the tasks and if we realize that they are not, we transfer them (KIIS 10, HR NPS).

These examples and interview results leads to the conclusion that mental health is an issue that needs serious consideration by the national police service. The continued rise in cases of depression as manifested through acts such as committing suicide, shooting colleagues can be traces to the nature of the operations by the NPS. It therefore behooves on the service to consider reforming its structure so as to address the issue of promotions policy as well workloads of the officers in the service with a view of addressing their mental health. Therefore, a combination of reform measures on the structural and institutional architecture together with mental health ought to be prioritized in order to reduce the rising cases of depression in the NPS.

Conclusion

This paper has presented the institutional and structural practices which accentuate depression among police officers in the NPS of Kenya. It has come out that the practices such as promotions policy, overlaps between the functions of NPS and NPSC as well as the workload do have a huge bearing on the increasing cases of depression among police officers. Therefore, to be able to address the issue of depression, it must begin from the institutional and structural level.

Recommendations

- 1) There should be amendments to the NPS and NPSC acts to remove overlaps on promotions and recruitment of police officers.
- 2) The mental health of police officers ought to be integrated into their operations as well as training.
- 3) Sensitization of senior police officers on depression among the junior officers in order to enable them act on the cases they come across such cases.

Declarations

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