



No Rest for the Weary

It's a schedule all too familiar to many in public safety. Night shift ends at 8 a.m. Court begins a short time later, with no time for sleep in between. By the time court is over, it's time to pick up the youngest child after school. An hour later it's time to take the oldest to soccer practice. Then it's dinner time, and in a few short hours, it's back to work.

For a day or two, even a few more, most people in good health can keep pace with that kind of schedule. But as the months and years go by, lack of proper rest can really take its toll. So says Bryan Vila, a former law enforcement officer who is a professor at Washington State University in Spokane and a pioneer of research into how fatigue affects police officers.

Vila and several of his colleagues are making plans to create a laboratory setting where officers, intentionally deprived of sleep, will test their shooting, driving, and other skills when drowsy. These plans call for equipment such as deadly force decisionmaking and driving simulators, peripheral awareness monitors, communications equipment, and exercise machinery, all of which will be used to test officers' judgment and physical skills. Subjects will be deprived of sleep for 24 hours or more and will be tested wearing full uniforms and gear to make the simulations as realistic as possible.

Vila speaks several dozen times a year to law enforcement agencies and organizations about the profound effects that sleep deprivation can have on officers' performance. His presentation focuses on how sleep (or the lack thereof) and stress affect health in general, how this impacts the decisions that law enforcement officers must make daily, and what law enforcement agencies and officers can do to improve the situation.

"Normal stress protects us from threats, but prolonged stress damages the body and the brain," Vila says. "If you work in law enforcement, you know all about disrupted sleep and about not having specific time set aside for sleep."

Washington State University plans to use the state-of-the-art simulation technology to assess two major areas:

performance and attentiveness. Vila notes that studies of military personnel from Walter Reed Army Medical Center indicated that soldiers who went 48 to 72 hours without sleep lost none of their marksmanship skills. Their ability to distinguish appropriate targets, however, did become impaired. Other studies show that individuals deprived of sleep for 24 hours exhibit the same level of physical impairment as persons with a .10 blood alcohol level

"Short-term effects of sleep deprivation include worsened mood, decreased awareness, impaired physical and cognitive functioning, and reduced ability to deal with stress," Vila says. "When an individual builds up a sleep debt, it takes several days or more of increased sleep to erase it. Also, poor sleep generates worse sleep in a vicious cycle, leading to long-term effects such as profound fatigue, which can reduce officer safety, health, and performance."

A large body of research shows that the vast majority of people need 7 to 8 hours of sleep each night with a minimum requirement of 6.5 hours average to avoid sleep deprivation. Shift work, overtime, swing shifts, and "moonlighting," all common in the law enforcement and corrections community, also interfere with establishing good sleep habits. Studies by Vila and his colleagues have shown that—

- Fifty-three percent of law enforcement officers average less than 6.5 hours of sleep daily.
- More than 90 percent of law enforcement officers report being routinely fatigued and 85 percent reported driving while drowsy.
- Although no regulated work-hour standards exist for law enforcement and corrections personnel, officers routinely exceed U.S. work-hour standards for power plant operators, truck drivers, and airline pilots.
- Depression and suicidal thoughts increase for male officers as their overtime increases; for female officers, these mental states are more affected by shift changes.

- Since 1974, felonious deaths of law enforcement officers have declined, while the rate of accidental deaths has remained more or less steady in spite of the advent of radial tires, shoulder harnesses, antilock brake systems, and airbags.

“In summary, many officers are overly tired all the time,” Vila says. “This is a serious problem because fatigue severely impacts the parts of the brain that we use to think clearly, to solve problems, and to make difficult moral choices. Officers are out there equipped with a lot of sophisticated technology and are dealing with people in stressful situations. They need their most important piece of protective equipment—their brain—to be working for them.”

Possible fatigue countermeasures include minimizing shift rotation (but considering individual preferences such as childcare issues), educating officers about the need to get sufficient rest, and minimizing overtime and long hours, Vila says.

“The obvious conclusion is that minimizing fatigue and stress will protect officers,” he says. “However, this requires a change in the culture, which traditionally says that the more hours an officer works, the tougher he or she is. Many law enforcement departments also must contend with workforce shortages that require officers to work overtime. It may not be possible to change the culture all at once, but once agencies are made aware of the risk, they can—and must—begin making the kinds of small adjustments to policy and practice that nudge the police culture in the right direction. Evolutionary approaches like this are often more effective in policing than dramatic attempts to revolutionize how things are done.”

For more information on the research being conducted by Professor Vila, visit www.spokane.wsu.edu/Academics/CrimJ/crimj_vila.html or contact him directly at vila@wsu.edu or 509-358-7711. For more information on sleep research at Washington State University at Spokane, visit www.spokane.wsu.edu/researchoutreach/sleep/.

STUDY: OFFICER FATIGUE

Several years ago the Office of Justice Programs’ National Institute of Justice sponsored the first-ever study specifically on the effects of fatigue on police performance. Findings from this study led to the publication of the report “Evaluating the Effects of Fatigue on Police Patrol Officers.” This report can be accessed at www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/184188.pdf/. In addition, a 2002 article in the *NIJ Journal* titled “Tired Cops: The Prevalence and Potential Consequences of Police Fatigue” can be accessed at www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/jr000248d.pdf.

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This article was reprinted from the Winter 2008 edition of *TechBeat*, the award-winning quarterly newsmagazine of the National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center System, a program of the National Institute of Justice under Cooperative Agreement #2005-MU-CX-K077, awarded by the U.S. Department of Justice.

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