

# COVID-19 and police personnel: An exploratory community based study from South India

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** COVID-19 has ensured that countries enforced complete lock down to prevent the spread of infection. Despite millions of people working from home during this pandemic situation, police personnel 'the front line workers' who deal with the general population to ensure their safety and wellbeing are at risk of stress and other mental health problems in addition to the risk of infection itself. **Aim:** The aim of this study is to explore the perception of police personnel towards the disease, factors influencing stress and coping abilities of them amid COVID-19. **Methods:** A cross-sectional qualitative study was conducted using in-depth interviews among randomly selected police personnel working in COVID-19 situation across the district of Karaikal, Puducherry. **Results:** Of the 32 police personnel, majority were of age group 36-45 (43.75%), followed by 25-35 (37.5%). More than half of them were married (78.12%). Around 62.5% had been in the present occupation for more than 5 years. The in depth interviews were group under 5 themes namely perception, practice they follow amid COVID-19, stress they go through, challenges faced, coping strategies used by them. **Conclusion:** It is the need of the hour to care for the well-being of frontline workers, especially police personals.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Police personnel, Stress, Coping strategies

## Introduction

The COVID-19 is potentially a severe acute respiratory infection caused by SARS-CoV 2. It has made an impact both in terms of morbidity and mortality across countries and continents; declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC)

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Received: 24-06-2020

Revised: 13-09-2020

Accepted: 21-09-2020

Published: 27-02-2021

and later a pandemic.<sup>[1,2]</sup> Most of the countries enforced complete lockdown and make their people stay at home to prevent the spread of infection. Despite millions of people working from home during this COVID-19 pandemic, the health care workers and police personnel are the front line workers who deal with the patients, suspects, and the people at risk for their safety and well-being. The police personnel are responsible for enforcing stay at home and related orders to halt the disease transmission and keep the public safe. This puts them at higher risk of SARS-CoV 2 infection. Currently, the pandemic has resulted in stress of varying degrees among people. One of the most stressful situations is the unpredictability of the situation and the uncertainty over disease control and the seriousness of the risk.

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**How to cite this article:** Boovaragasamy C, Kumar M, Sandirakumaran A, Gnanasabai G, Rahman M, Govindasamy A. COVID-19 and police personnel: An exploratory community based study from South India. J Family Med Prim Care 2021;10:816-9.

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DOI:  
10.4103/jfmpc.jfmpc\_1249\_20

On the other hand, challenges and stress can trigger common mental disorders, such as anxiety and depression.<sup>[3]</sup> Adding to the inherent stress (occupational) of police personnel, this current COVID -19 situation has brought an impact on their mental health and well-being. Every individual in the country faces the stress of this lockdown and on the other hand, the policemen face the stress of handling the people who violate and protecting the people from the exposure. It is important for the primary care physicians, the so-called first line of defense to understand the impact of COVID-19 in terms of physical and mental health on the general population; in particular vulnerable groups like police personal. Hence the current research was undertaken to explore the perception of the disease, factors influencing the stress, and coping up abilities of them amid COVID-19.

## Materials and Methods

### Study design

This was a cross-sectional study using in-depth interview as a qualitative method.

### Study area and study population

The qualitative research was conducted among the police personnel working for COVID-19 in the district of Karaikal, Puducherry.

### Study period

The current study was conducted in the month of April 2020.

### Study procedure

In-depth interviews were conducted among a total of 32 police personnel randomly selected from all the areas involving at least 1 police person in each of the police stations from out of the total 15 police stations in the district of Karaikal. The interview was facilitated using an interview guide which was prepared beforehand. Data were captured when they were on duty. The participants were encouraged to use open questions to express their state of stress, different problems, and challenges they came across in working during this crisis period of COVID-19, and how they are coping up for it. Probes were used among the study participants as a hint to think whenever they were unable to get in-depth of the concerned topic. The interview lasted for not more than 20-30 minutes. The interview was recorded after taking consent from the participant and the recordings were kept confidential.

### Statistical analysis

Transcripts were written from the audio recording of the in-depth interviews and field notes. Manual thematic content analysis based on the prefixed codes and categories was done.

### Ethical consideration

The study was approved by Institutional Ethics Committee. Written informed consent was taken from each of the study participants before starting the interview.

## Results

A total of 32 police personnel randomly selected from all the areas involving at least 1 police person in each of the police station from the district of Karaikal participated in the study. In-depth interviews were conducted among them with the help of the interview schedule.

Majority of the participants are from the age group of 36–45 years (43.75%), followed by 25–35 (37.5%). More than half of them were married (78.12%). Around 62.5% had been in the present occupation for more than 5 years. [Table 1]

A total of 32 In-depth interviews were conducted till the point of saturation.

**Table 1: Distribution of Socio-demographic details among the study population (N=32)**

| Variable                              | Label            | n (%)      |
|---------------------------------------|------------------|------------|
| Age                                   | 25-35            | 12 (37.5)  |
|                                       | 36-45            | 14 (43.75) |
|                                       | 46-60            | 6 (18.75)  |
| Gender                                | Male             | 27 (84.37) |
|                                       | Female           | 5 (15.63)  |
| Marital Status                        | Single           | 5 (15.63)  |
|                                       | Married          | 25 (78.12) |
|                                       | Separated        | 2 (6.25)   |
| Religion                              | Hindu            | 26 (81.25) |
|                                       | Christian        | 4 (12.5)   |
|                                       | Muslim           | 2 (6.25)   |
| Education Status                      | Higher Secondary | 4 (12.5)   |
|                                       | Undergraduate    | 20 (62.5)  |
|                                       | Post-graduate    | 8 (25)     |
| Number of years in present occupation | <1 year          | 3 (9.38)   |
|                                       | 1-3 years        | 2 (6.25)   |
|                                       | 3-5 years        | 7 (21.87)  |
|                                       | >5 years         | 20 (62.5)  |
| Residence                             | Karaikal         | 21 (65.62) |
|                                       | Outside Karaikal | 11 (34.38) |

**Table 2a: Findings from in-depth interviews**

### TOPIC: PERCEPTION OF COVID-19

#### RESPONSES

COVID-19 is a viral infection first originated in the Wuhan city of China

"மற்ற நாடுகளை விட இந்தியா வல் கொரோனா தாக்கம் கம்மியா தான் இருக்கு"

"Cases less in India compared to other countries"

"It's the power of public who can very well control the pandemic by staying in home"

"Sharing of fomites cause spread"

"Close contacts and gathering will worsen pandemic"

Infection can spread through droplets and while coughing

"சுத்தமாக இருந்தல், கைகளை சோப்பு போட்டு நன்றாக கழுவுதல் நோய் தொற்றை தடுக்க முடியும்"

"Proper handwashing & personal hygiene practices can prevent infection"

**Table 2b: Findings from in-depth interviews**

**TOPIC: PRACTICES THEY FOLLOW AMID COVID-19**

RESPONSES:

|  |
|--|
| Maintaining social distancing  |
| <b>"கப சுரக் குடிநீர் பருகதல்"</b><br>"Drinking kabasura kudineer"   |
| "Washing hands with homemade turmeric and neem leaves water"   |
| "Using masks when going out"   |
| "Refreshments done in the police station itself before going home to prevent spread to our family members" |

**Table 2c: Findings from in-depth interviews**

**TOPIC: STRESS GOING THROUGH**

RESPONSES:

|  |
|--|
| "Not able to spend time with family members as like everyone in this lockdown period"  |
| <b>"நோய் தொற்று வந்துருமோன்று பயமா இருக்கு"</b><br>"Fear of getting infected"  |
| "No provision of daily allowance during this crisis time"  |
| "Food & refreshments difficult during duty hours"  |
| "Fear of mingling with family members"   |
| <b>"27 வருஷம் வேலை சர்வீஸ்-ல, 40 நாள் தொடர்ந்து ஓட்டி பாக்கறேன்"</b><br>"Over the past 27 years work experience, doing continuous duties for 40 days as of now"    |
| "No screening done for us, no PPE given for us"  |
| "Not able to take care of neither our own health nor our family health care needs"   |
| "Not able to go back home since it's far away from the work place"   |
| <b>"எவ்வோ சொன்னாலும் மக்கள வெளிய வராதீங்க-எனா சொல்றதையே கேக்க மாட்டறாங்க"</b><br>"Most of the people are not obeying to our words of not coming out unnecessarily" |

Interviews were conducted to explore in depth for capturing the

- Perception of COVID-19 [Table 2a]
- Practice they follow amid COVID-19 [Table 2b]
- Stress they go through [Table 2c]
- Challenges faced [Table 2d]
- Coping strategies used by them [Table 2e]

The themes that emerged from the IDIs are presented below as headings and supported by quotes from the participants. The participants' responses are provided in green boxes; verbatim responses are within quotes. The content in "bold text" was the responses that were said most emphatically and repeatedly.

**Discussion**

In the present study, majority of the participants are from the age group of 36 – 45 years (43.75%). Almost 62.5% had been in the present occupation for more than 5 years. This could reveal the cumulative stress over the years in the currently employed occupation. Around 34.38% of the study participants were residing outside the city of Karaikal and it is understood that

**Table 2d: Findings from in-depth interviews**

**TOPIC: CHALLENGES FACED**

RESPONSES:

|   |
|---|
| "Public violating the lockdown...making them stay safe in their homes is a great challenge"                   |
| "Some people are not wearing masks when they come out; making them do so all the time is a great deal for us" |
| "Tired of continuous duties"  |
| "Less means of refreshments"  |
| "Not able to take food despite duties, even when it is available"   |

**Table 2e: Findings from in-depth interviews**

**TOPIC: COPING STRATEGIES USED BY THEM**

RESPONSES:

|  |
|--|
| "We got used to these hectic duties"   |
| "We're doing the duties as a service to the public and feel great"   |
| Moral support from our family and friends  |
| "Helping out each other in this crisis period"   |
| "We got trained like this during our training period itself and got adapted to handle these kinds of emergency situations" |

they are away from their homes in this situation of COVID-19. When asked about the perception of the current pandemic, we could able to capture the fair responses like its causative agent, disease transmission, signs and symptoms and preventive measures; this could be attributed to effective risk communication by Government of India and the role of mass/social media. This clearly states that enough awareness is there among everyone.

When explored about handling of the situation of COVID-19, majority of the policemen expressed that they face stress in various aspects both as personal and as well as at work. In a study conducted by Singh S, et al. it was reported that, the nature of job in relation to work overload, environmental stressors, traveling away from organizations, organizational structure and role conflict, interpersonal stressors, and private and personal stressors contribute to the stress experienced by the police personnel at the workplace.<sup>[4]</sup>

In the present study, they said that there were less means of refreshments in between the duties adding on to the stress of their daily duties. Since lockdown enforcement effect is in place, there was no availability of "tea shops" for them. This is in similarity to an exploratory study done by Singh S, et al. which describes the job of police personnel as "unlimited and unpredictable" with "insufficient sleep hours and irregular meals" which renders their lifestyle extremely exhausting and unpredictable.<sup>[5]</sup>

When explored in-depth about the stress and the challenges faced by them, they opened that despite of regular continuous duties, spending less time on family health care and other needs during this lockdown situation, they have fear of mingling with their family members because of the fear of infecting them, not able to spend time with the family members as like everyone does in this lockdown period, no

provision of daily allowance were commonly reported by most of the police personnel. The most challenging thing faced by them at this time is, making the people stay in their homes and not violating the lockdown.

Coping mechanisms are the individual person's strategies for tackling the stress. Likewise, the coping skills adopted by them were accepting the stressful events as a part of job responsibility or fact of life, seeking support from the family/friends, sense of accomplishment of doing the duties as a service. Similarly, a fewer studies reported that engaging in physical activities, entertainment sources like TV and music, thinking positively the problems can be solved and confront the problems, trying to find comfort in their religion, trying to see everything in a different light to make it more positive were the coping mechanisms likely to be adapted by them though their applicability in a crisis situation such as COVID-19 is questionable.<sup>[6-14]</sup>

## Conclusion

This study contributes to our understanding of how the police personnel perceive and cope up with the current situation of COVID-19 and hence it is the need of this hour to prioritize the well-being of the police personnel. It was observed that police officers adapt different forms of coping with stress; either trained or learnt with experience. If tested and evaluated adaptive methods are used, the consequences of occupational stress can be reduced.

## Recommendations

Considering the current situation of COVID-19, we would like to recommend the following for the police personnel. They should be provided with personal protective equipment like mask and sanitizers. Facilities for proper periodical screening of police personnel should be made to alleviate stress. Rationalizing the duty for in terms of duty hours/days can be done. Making refreshments available or provisioning them through allowances. Keeping them motivated through regular situation update meetings. Hence these measures needed to be taken to address their stress and challenges faced.

## Acknowledgment:

We are grateful to Dr. Ambujam, Dean, Vinayaka Missions Medical College, Karaikal, Puducherry for her constant motivation and support towards research.

## Declaration of patient consent

The authors certify that they have obtained all appropriate patient consent forms. In the form the patient(s) has/have given his/her/their consent for his/her/their images and other clinical information to be reported in the journal. The patients understand that their names and initials will not be published and

due efforts will be made to conceal their identity, but anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

## Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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